

MORALITY

When I studied at Maynooth many years ago, the then Professor of Moral Theology, Pat Hannon, described morality as “the art of right relationship with each other and with the world around us”. There are several important things that we can immediately say about that definition. The first thing one notices is that there is no mention of God in that definition, and that is deliberate. For morality is a human thing, and one does not need to belong to any faith tradition to come to understand its requirements. But for the person of faith, a god or gods will rightly play an important part in how they think about morality, relationships, and the world they inhabit. So, allowing for the addition of a faith dimension, and indeed the need for self-care, we could describe morality as “the art of right relationship with God, ourselves, others, and the world around us”. The 10 Commandments, each in their own way, capture elements of that definition. Let me explain how.

ORDERING OF THE COMMANDMENTS

The first thing we notice is the very obvious division in the ordering of the commandments. The first four concern our relationship with God; the remaining six deal with our relationship to those around us. This in turn illustrates a very important connection between faith and practice. We are reminded throughout the Old and New Testaments that the person of faith must also be a person of action. Or to put it another way, it is not enough to profess ones faith in the God of the Old Testament if one also mistreats people, or fails to look after the environment. In fact, one’s commitment to God is best realized through our being loving and just in this life. The Prophets condemned the neglect of the most vulnerable in society, and in the New

Testament Jesus most commonly condemned the hypocrites – those who said one thing but did another. And so, these commandments remind us not only of our religious duties, but also of our responsibilities to our neighbour – they help inform us as to how we might live in “right relationship with God, each other, and the world around us”. They remind us that our faith is one that pushes us out into the world, to take on its challenges, and to be a positive presence in the here and now.

PRACTICE

Secondly, if we take Hannon’s definition of morality once more, we see that he describes it as an “art”. As with any other art we wish to perfect, morality is something that we must work at. We struggle with it, we fail sometimes, we may be unsure or hesitant, we get lazy. And this “art” may suffer because of that. But with practice we can become better at morality to the point where we don’t even think about the good that we are doing. This in turn suggests that morality is not about learning off rules and performing good acts per se, as though it is some formal exercise. Rather, morality is about moral growth, virtue, character, and happiness. The commandments certainly identify actions to be avoided, but they also draw attention to the inner workings of the moral person – our intentions and our motives – as we shall see in later articles. In other words, we are not called to merely avoid bad actions, but to become better persons in the world, to grow morally, and to flourish. Thus, although sometimes thought of in negative terms (things not to do), the commandments are in fact about positive living, right relationship with those around us, and personal moral growth.

Over the coming weeks we will look at each of these commandments in turn and consider their ongoing relevance for our world. ■



Today’s readings

Is 22:19-23
Rm 11:33-36
Mt 16:13-20

Jesus struggled with many things during his ministry, but one of the common threads that run through the parables and gospel scenes is the difficulty people had in identifying him as the Son of God, the Messiah.

Today’s gospel is a teaching exercise for the disciples. It is time for Jesus to claim his true identity and he needs his followers to understand. ‘Who do people say the Son of God is?’ he asks. The answers that come back to him are varied. Some still identify Elijah, Jeremiah or John the Baptist as the Son of God. But Peter is confident today.

He steps forward and is unequivocal in his announcement, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ This statement from Peter is interesting as he has witnessed many of Jesus’ acts of healing and miracles. He is convinced that the man he has been following and watching closely is the Son of God. The future direction of the Church will rest on Peter’s shoulders and Jesus says, ‘You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.’ Peter will go on to tell the world of the Messiah who brought healing, love and compassion to everyone he met on the way.

GOD’S WORD TODAY

SoulSpace

SERIES: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
IN A MODERN WORLD

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In this new series, **Suzanne Mulligan** looks at the commandments and their relevance for our world.



CONTEMPLATING THE COMMANDMENTS

As is the case with any biblical text, we must approach the 10 Commandments with reverence and respect. But we must also properly try to understand what exactly these texts are saying. For they were written in a particular time and context, they belong to a certain tradition, and they must be understood against the backdrop of such things. And so, before we can apply the commandments to our own world we must first interpret accurately what is being said. Over the coming weeks we will look at each commandment individually, and consider how they remain relevant as we journey through this modern and complex world.

