3 June 2018: Choral Eucharist
The First Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 81: 1–10; Deuteronomy 5: 12–15; 2 Corinthians 4: 5–12; Mark 2: 23 – 3: 6

The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

August 1952, and a shepherd boy chanced upon some pots in a cave overlooking the Dead Sea. Inside were ancient Scrolls, with passages of scripture written on papyrus and animal skin. Produced in the lifetime of Joseph and Mary they include a copy of the words we heard today. The Ten Commandments.

Jesus would have known them by heart. When a young man asked him how to live the Good Life, Jesus said, ‘Keep the Commandments.’ Not so long ago in this country people would learn them by heart, along with the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, and be able to recite them before they were confirmed.

Nowadays their use is more sporadic. Perhaps they feel too long, too forbidding, altogether too old fashioned. We want to live by the law of Love, not by a set of prohibitions. But in fact the two go together. Jesus summed up the Commandments saying, ‘You shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.’ He wasn’t doing away with them, but cutting through to the heart of their message. How do we love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves?

The words are printed in the pew sheet if you want to follow them, and verse 1 makes clear that they are for all God’s people. For whoever is listening, verse 3, ‘All of us here, alive today.’

The first commandment in verse 6 calls us to single hearted devotion to God. There is no other. As Augustine said, ‘O God thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.’ God alone is where our hearts find their eternal home.
If the first commandment speaks of our inward devotion to God, the second speaks of our outward devotion and prohibits the worship of idols. Jews generally have no images at all in places of worship, and nor do Muslims. The same is true in some churches, though most allow images in stained glass, paintings and sculptures, as we do here. I can go along with that as we don’t worship the images themselves, but God who lies behind all things.

Images can be helpful as pathways to deeper devotion to the one true God. And as Christians we have been given Jesus himself. As Paul says, he is the ultimate image of the invisible God, revealing in flesh and bold what God is like in spirit and truth. If images are a distraction put them away. But if they truly lead us to God, as Jesus did, I don’t feel they break this commandment.

Verses 9 and 10 speak of God ‘punishing sins of parents to the third and fourth generation.’ That seems so unfair to me. But perhaps behind it lies the thing we like to forget. That sin has consequences, and not just for the sinner.

Like it or not the sins, addictions, or abusive behaviours of parents do affect children and grandchildren. Our bad behaviours affect others as well as ourselves. But the verses make clear that the law of love is infinitely stronger. Every act of self-giving love rolls down not just three or four, but through thousands of generations. Acts of love are of infinite value.

The third commandment prohibits taking God’s name in vain. We may cry out in genuine distress to God or to Jesus. That is an arrow prayer and is fine! But casual swearing using these names cheapens and profanes them. John Wesley went further. When we profess God’s name in church, he says, but do not live up to that profession in our daily lives, then we are also taking his name in vain. I know that can sometimes be me.

Number Four. Keep the Sabbath day holy. The Sabbath is not an oppression, but is God’s gift to us, a day to bask in his presence, and ideally in the company of friends or family. Some people speak of an hour a day, a day a week, a week a year, as their time set aside for God. Time to let go, and let God love you. We need to work it out in our own way, but the principle of Sabbath is key. Without it we just go round and round in circles and never stop. Life begins to lose its sacred shape.
The next five commandments explore how we love our neighbour. We are to honour our father and mother. A new kind of challenge for my generation as people live longer and longer, and retired people in their 70’s find they are still caring for parents. But we can’t say we love God and then despise those nearest to us.

Number six. Commit no murder. A different word in Hebrew from killing in battle, or when legally sanctioned, but nevertheless stemming from a fundamental fact of creation. That all people are made in the image of God. If we ever hear someone referring to others as ‘animals’ they are denying that sacred truth.

Do not commit adultery, commandment seven. Relationships need a sacred boundary, a place of complete trust in which love can thrive. God is faithful to us. We are to be faithful to him, and so to one another.

Number eight. You shall not steal. Most of us here are not burglars or thieves. But is there more to this? John Wesley again. All things come from God. So all I have and possess is not mine, but God’s. So I need to use what I have for others good as well as my own. Otherwise I too will be guilty of stealing…

Number nine. False witness. Spreading gossip on social media means it’s never been easier to break this commandment. But a diet of fake news will destroy our capacity to recognise the truth when it comes. We need to resist that temptation, and recognise false witness when we see it.

And finally the tenth commandment not to covet what others have. Their wife, their ox, their car, their house, their job, their status, their voice, their body, their luck, their life…. Envy can become overwhelming, and feeds self-hatred. The antidote is to give thanks for what we do have, however small. Any small act of love or kindness, given or received, any moment of beauty however fleeting. When my mother died recently we found she had kept a daily thanksgiving diary for years, noting down in just a couple of lines something or someone she was thankful for that day. This service is called the Eucharist, a word which means thanksgiving. We do this in remembrance of Jesus, as he invited us to do. The eucharistic discipline of giving thanks is our duty and our joy, and ultimately our salvation.

Love God, love your neighbour and love yourself. In the end, like all good things in our faith, the three come together as one.

Amen.