

Living God's Way – Make Him No. 1
Exodus 20:1-3; Mark 12: 28-31

I wonder if you've ever come across a board game called The Game of Life ? It was popular in the 1980s, and consisted of a board that you moved round according to the throw of a dice, that represented your life and events that could happen to you. The pieces were little plastic cars, and in the driving seat you started with a plastic peg with a round head – either blue or pink depending whether you were a girl or a boy. And if you were especially lucky and landed on the right squares another peg of the other colour was added in the passenger seat as you got married, and then there was space in the back for up to four more passengers in case you got lucky and kept landing on the 'congratulations you have a new baby' squares. Waddingtons were obviously the first to invent people carriers for the larger family, even if they were only plastic and a couple of centimetres long !!

The Ten Commandments, as we begin this morning to look at them individually, are a bit like a set of instructions for how to drive your car successfully as you participate in the real game of life.

It's going to take us beyond Christmas, as we work through them one at a time looking at their relevance for us today.

So, the first commandment is, 'You shall have no other gods before me'.

If, like me you have a forget-ory rather than a memory, and you need a way of fixing things in your mind – here's my tip for the first commandment.

You might know a song that starts 'I'm gonna clap' It goes *I'm gonna clap clap clap, I'm gonna click click click, I'm gonna clap, I'm gonna click and praise the Lord. For all that he's done I'm gonna make him number one. I'm gonna clap, I'm gonna click and praise the Lord!*

For all that he's done I'm gonna make him number one...

Well that's how I remember the first commandment : Number 1 is about making Him number 1

The people of Israel had spent many years in slavery to the Egyptians, and over time as usually happens, they'd adapted to the culture, and adopted some of the practices, as they began to integrate almost without noticing it happen. The Egyptians were polytheistic – they worshipped many gods, in fact many is a bit of an understatement...hundreds, as many as they fancied, whatever they fancied became a god.

God said to the people of Israel, *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.* For the word, before me, also read besides me. You shall have no other gods besides me.

This covenant relationship between God and his people could only work if there was no one else getting in the way. You know the saying two's company, three's a crowd? That certainly applied to the relationship between God and Israel. *Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God is a jealous God*, is recorded in Deuteronomy chapter six.

It was very radical, very different in that time to insist on monotheism, the belief in and worship of one god.

God set out right at the start of this laying down of the rules of covenant the basic foundation that it had to be him, and Him alone, other wise the relationship was doomed to failure.

Getting foundations right is a fairly crucial part of any building's future success. Along with half the tele watching nation, I'm addicted to the programme Property Ladder where Sarah Beeny, an apparently successful property developer visits projects of novice developers and gives them advice, and comments on their glaring mistakes and inability to keep to the original budget, so that we can sit comfortably on our settees and think self righteously that we would never have made such a bad choice of floor tiles. Anyway, on one occasion she featured a developer who went ahead without planning permission, did stuff his own way, hadn't sought advice and ended up building an extension without the correct depth of foundations. In the end part of his neighbours garden had to be dug up to determine the shallowness of the foundations, and the authorities ended up making him take down the extension, resulting in disastrous consequences for his profit, and disastrous consequences for his relationships with the neighbours and the planning department.

God knows our natures, knows what makes us tick, knows what leads to fulfilling lifestyle and what doesn't - after all, didn't he create us- and he knows that the foundation for our lives must be him and him alone.

It was true several thousand years ago for a group of wandering Jews in the desert, and it's true for us today. Mind you, it's not a very fashionable claim to make in today's world, is it? We live in a pluralist, post modern society where supposedly anything goes. We can believe what we want, relate to people how we want, be community how we want. Life is basically one enormous bag of pick and mix, where we select what we fancy.

Come to think of it, it doesn't sound that different from what the Egyptians and most of the ancient world were doing with their numerous gods.

You shall have no other gods before me. Perhaps you're thinking, that's okay, I don't have any other gods. I'm not into this picking and mixing my deities. God is my god. I'm doing the first commandment, so far that's 100% obedience to Gods' commandments. phew, I'm doing okay!

Jesus had an uncomfortable way of challenging people who looked at God's laws and thought 'phew I'm doing okay'. When asked what the most important commandment was Jesus replied 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your

mind and all your strength.' Somehow that seems much more challenging than saying , no other gods before me. But in essence it means the same. If we are loving God with all our heart, if we're loving Him with all our soul, if we're loving him with all our strength, if we're loving him with all our mind then that's all areas of our lives in which we're making him number one. There's no time, room or energy left for any other gods. Time and time again in the gospels we see that Jesus has an uncanny knack of getting right to the heart of the issue and not allowing us to pay lip service to God's laws

So perhaps now using Jesus' interpretation we're not feeling quite so sorted.

Back to the idea of our lives being like a car driving round. The evangelist J John asks us to consider 'where is God in the car of your life ?

Is he in the car at all, or have we not invited him to be a part of our lives ?

Is he in there but locked in the boot out of sight, out of mind, not able to participate at all ?

Is he in the back seat, just along for the ride ?

Is he in the front passenger seat, but powerless to take control ?

Or is he in the driving seat, guiding the direction that our car, our life, is taking ?

How, in today's post-modern world can we make sure that God remains number one, that he doesn't slip down the chart; that he stays in the driving seat and our lives stay on the right track ?

I think the answer is three-fold.

Firstly, keep focussed on Jesus. When we look at the gospels we're reminded that God isn't number one in our lives just because he says he should be, but because of what he's done for us through His Son, our Saviour. If we're reading God's word and worshipping on a regular basis, then we've got a much better chance of staying focussed on him than if we're not bothering. And I guess that means making an effort to read the Bible when we don't feel like it, and attend worship when we'd rather have a lie in.

Secondly, keep God number one by allowing God's Holy Spirit to strengthen, encourage, refresh, renew us and lead us in our Christian journey. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as a helper, and if we don't acknowledge Him or give Him his rightful place then we're cutting ourselves off from the major power source.

Thirdly, keep God number one by looking at our lives and asking ourselves some tough questions.

Not long ago Ian, (my husband that is, not the minister,) did a time management course. As part of the preparation for it he was asked to divide twenty four hours into fifteen minute slots, and at the end of every fifteen minutes note down what he had been doing in that slot.

We were looking at the chart a few nights ago, and I began thinking about how we always manage to make time for the things that are really important to us.

As we seek to keep God at the number one spot in our lives, one of the areas to look at is the amount of time we spend with Him. At the moment where is He fitting into our daily and weekly schedule ?

Apart from time, money is another big indicator as to the importance of something in our lives. Is God allowed the number one spot in our finances, or is it an area that we prefer to keep him out of ?

And what about our conversations ? We generally like to talk about the things that are dear to us. I am perfectly happy to tell anyone who'll listen that I'm a fan of Sunderland Association Football Club, despite their dismal showing so far this season. Likewise I can witter on about my children, as most parents can until everyone is totally bored of listening. But am I as willing to talk to people about the importance of God in my life ?

Does God hold the number one spot in our finances, our careers, our hobbies and recreation, our relationships, our marriage, our family life, our friendships, our daily and weekly time schedule, our joys and successes, our difficulties and worries ?

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 records the following words, *'when the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you – a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant – then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

There was always a risk that when everything was going well for the people of Israel, they would forget God, and he would slip from the number one spot. We see that happening time and time again throughout Israel's history. That risk is just as real for us today. Does God occupy first place for us in the good times as well as in the bad ?

Jesus reminds us to love God with every fibre of our being – heart, soul, mind and strength, and if we aim to do that then God really will stay top of our priorities.

For all that He's done, make Him number one.

Living God's Way – Make Him No 1
Exodus 20:1-3; Mark 12: 28-31

Housegroup notes

The first commandment, You shall have no other gods before me, formed the foundation of the covenant between God and Israel. There was no room for the polytheistic religion that was common at the time. God demanded an exclusive relationship between Him and His people.

Jesus described the most important commandment as *loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength*. If we did this God would in fact have the top priority, as all our energy would be focussed on Him.

Reminding ourselves of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, asking the Holy Spirit's help and checking out God's position in each area of our lives can help us to keep God in the number one position.

Discussion starters:

Why do you think God demands an exclusive relationship with Israel, and with us ?

Can you think of times in Israel's history when the people didn't make God their number one ?

What are the 'other gods' that exist in our society today, and which ones (if any) do you find particularly tempting ?

Using the analogy of a car to represent your life, think about where God might be (eg in the boot, in the driving seat, etc) and if you think His position needs to change, how might you achieve that ?