

NO GRAVEN IMAGES

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The story is told of a little girl who was drawing a picture. She was so engrossed in her work that her mother asked, "What are you drawing?" "Oh it's a picture of God" said the child. "A picture of God! But darling no-one knows what God looks like!" "No" said the little girl "but they will when I get through".

The idea that we know exactly what God is like is not confined to children. Have you never met the kind of religious person who, whatever the subject seems to know what God with absolute certainty? The point of the second commandment is to warn us against arrogance of this kind, to remind us that God is too far beyond us to be represented by anything we might draw or make or understand.

Remember the setting in which the commandments were given. In the desert Moses has had an overwhelming experience of God. And he wants to know what God's name is in order to use it with Pharaoh. In reply he is simply given the name *Yahweh*, which means "I am who I am", or possibly "I will be what I will be". It is a perplexing answer. Later the people of Israel crowded up against the holy mountain, trying to get a glimpse of this strange deity who had commanded their escape into the desert, but they were warned no-one could see him and live. So the people we are told kept their distance and Moses went into the darkness where God was.

This one of the great distinctive things about the religion of Israel. The other gods were easy to see. They were images of men or bulls or lions or eagles. Human beings could make pretty good representations of them. But *Yahweh*, the real God was beyond imagination. No-one could see him or compare him to anything they knew.

In 65 BC, after God's people had suffered centuries of warfare, exile, and persecution, the Romans finally arrived. The Romans were curious about the religion, the monotheism, of the Jews, particularly the great temple with its Holy of Holies. The Romans had many temples, many gods. When Jerusalem itself fell, the Roman general Pompey entered the temple, found the Holy of Holies at the centre, and, a little like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, ripped the curtain with his sword and entered the space on his horse. He expected to see a statue, an idol, an altar, a scroll—some object to represent the God of Israel. What he found was nothing, an empty space, the very essence of Judaism: mystery and transcendence of the one God.

Other gods were reducible to wood and stone and metal, but not *Yahweh*. Other gods could be depicted in painting and embroidery, but not *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* was the God of all gods. Nothing any human being could do would form a net to catch him. He was simply beyond human imagining and understanding. Always he remains shrouded in mystery. He is in fact, as Rudolf Otto would name him in our own day, the *Mysterium tremendum*, the most unfathomable mystery of all. Listen to Isaiah:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth
So are my ways higher than your ways
And my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9)

The God of the Bible is unknowable, hidden. The mystery defies and frustrates us. Idols are easy to understand, you can grasp them, hold them in your hand. It is easy to have idols. It is harder to trust the unknown voice in the darkness, "I AM WHO I AM." What it all comes down to, in their day and ours, is that we cannot own God.

If you think about it there are two fundamental errors you can make with God. The first is ignoring God as though he did not exist. In essence that is what our secular culture does today. You remember how **Tony Blair's spin chief Alasdair Campbell famously declared recently "we don't do God"**. The other day when Tony Blair hinted in the Parkinson programme that he prayed and one day believed he would come under the judgement of God there was criticism of him as a religious fanatic from those who simply couldn't understand that in the 21st century there were people to whom religion was actually part of their life.

But if ignoring God is the first fundamental error you can make the second is imagining that we have God taped, that whatever he understands, we understand so that whatever the topic we can declare his mind with absolute certainty.

Last time I was over in America there was a terrible crime committed in Pensacola in Florida. A doctor going into an abortion clinic and his minder were both gunned down and murdered. The killer turned out to be no ordinary criminal. He was a man of conscience, a pro-life campaigner, an ex-Presbyterian minister. And they asked him "Isn't there some contradiction between being pro-life and gunning a man down?" And he said "No. There wasn't." Because in this matter he was simply carrying out the judgement of God.

Listen to this from Pat Robertson, one of the hard-line leaders of the American Christian right. "You say you're supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist".

Or this from Christian activist Randall Terry: "Our goal [for America] is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism. We want theocracy. Theocracy means God rules. I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good. When I, or people like me, are running the country, you'd better flee, because we will find you, we will try you, and we will execute you".

Once anyone has a total certainty that they know the mind of God then watch out, for religion can become a curse. Before long the ayatollahs are around. Witches are being burned, scientists persecuted, doctors gunned down. It's this arrogance the second commandment is warning us against.

After 9/11, after tube bombings we know now the tragedy of religion that is utterly certain that it knows the heart and nature and will of God. We know the tragedy that results when there is no mystery, no doubts, no questions. Today religious extremists threaten the very fabric of every civilized society.

Do you remember J.B. Phillips little book "Your God is too Small?" That's what we do to God. We make him too small. We assume we know all about him, and what he wants and how he behaves. Before long I am the ventriloquist and he is my dummy.

A fundamental part of a mature religious faith is this - I will not sin against God by imagining I own him or I know all there is to know about him. St Augustine put it like this "Si comprehendis, non est Deus" - "Anything which your intellect is able to understand is too small to be God". God would not be God if we were able to know everything there is to know about him. Sometimes religion itself needs the reminder that God is God and we are not, that the God we have come to know remains, finally, unknowable.

But then what about Jesus? Hasn't it all been clear in him? Didn't Paul say "He is the image of the Invisible God"? Haven't we seen God in him? To that I say yes. Jesus will always be for me the standard by which I judge all ideas of God. I can view God in no other way but as he is in Jesus. In that sense Jesus is for me the way, the truth and the life, the doorway through which I enter the holiness of God. When I look at Jesus I know beyond hesitation that God is loving.

But that doesn't mean I understand all there is to know of God. What is God like in himself? Why is there so much pain in life? What does eternity mean? Is stem-cell research right or wrong? Can abortion ever be justified? Says Paul "Now we see through a glass darkly". That was after he found God in Jesus not before. God is big. None of us are more than on the edge of understanding him.

This morning, as always, I am pleading for Christian commitment. But let us be clear what this commitment entails. It is a call to enter into mysteries which reach beyond the horizon, beyond our sight. It is a call to breadth of mind and largeness of vision. Whenever we come to the fringe of the eternal there is

"A Deep beyond the deep
And a height beyond the height
And our hearing is not hearing
And our seeing is not sight".

If we can remember then we can offer to the world a religion which is a blessing not a curse. The world doesn't need those who reduce God to some ridiculous little idol or who imagine there is nothing about God they can't understand. The call is to worship a God whose truth is greater than we can imagine but who in his inexplicable love has come to us with amazing grace.

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