

Church Chat

We were privileged to hear Dr Rowan Williams (Lord Williams of Oystermouth), the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking at Lavenham Church last Monday on the subject *“Ethics and Empathy: a new framework for moral reflection?”*

Part of his message was that Christian ethics involve a constant learning process, and a developing relationship with God and our fellow human beings. In this context, it is worth looking at the ten commandments, the original basis of Christian ethics, which are displayed in the walls of many churches, and often read out in church services. They are listed in the second book of the Bible. Four of them begin with 'you shall not', and prohibit practices that need to be outlawed or discouraged for the health of human society: 'you shall not murder' (not 'you shall not kill'), 'you shall not steal', 'you shall not commit adultery', and 'you shall not bear false witness' (e.g. give lying evidence or make false accusations).

Then there are three that emphasize God's sovereignty: 'you shall have no other gods but me', 'you shall not worship (images or idols)', and 'you shall not take the Lord's name in vain' (e.g. use it as a curse). There are also two positive commandments: 'honour your father and mother' (perhaps if this commandment was more faithfully observed, there would be fewer lonely elderly people), and 'honour the Sabbath day, and keep it holy' (it is perhaps a good thing that the restrictive and often anomalous laws particularly against trading on a Sunday have now largely been repealed, but this commandment reflects the fact that these laws were set up for our benefit, and the value of having one day in the week that is different from the others, allowing us a rest from the busyness of everyday life, cannot be overestimated).

And then there is a final commandment - also beginning with 'you shall not', but different from the others: 'you shall not covet'. The word 'covet' is defined in the dictionary as 'desiring for oneself something belonging to someone else'. Here, then, is a commandment that deals not with outward behaviour, but with what is in our hearts.

Jesus, in the gospels, summarises the ten commandments in these words: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and *love your neighbour as yourself*'. Two of the commandments actually mention the word 'neighbour': you shall not bear

false witness' and 'you shall not covet'. In reply to a religious teacher who asked Jesus the question: 'who is my neighbour?' he replied with the story that we know as 'The Good Samaritan', the story of a man who is attacked on a journey, badly wounded and left to die. Three strangers come upon the man; two pass him by on the other side of the road, but the third gives him the help he needs. The point of the story is that the badly wounded man is our neighbour, and we too are asked to follow the example of the third stranger and answer that neighbour's needs. As Rowan Williams mentioned in his talk, empathy on its own is not enough, action is required of us in such circumstances and as Jesus says at the end of this story, 'Go and do likewise.'

Rowan Williams has written a book, 'Being a Christian (price £7.50) which is widely available, including from Lavenham church shop, and he has just published another, on a similar subject.

Tim Rose