

Homily of Third Sunday of Lent, Year B, 2024

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19:8-11; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

In the first reading, from the Book of Exodus, the Israelites had left Egypt and were no longer under Pharaoh and the laws of Egypt. God did not leave them without guiding principles. The commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) were to guide the Israelites' relationship with God and their relationship with one another.

The Ten Commandments are summarized as follows:

“1. I am the Lord your God; you shall not have any gods before me. 2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. 3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day. 4. Honor your father and your mother. 5. You shall not kill. 6. You shall not commit adultery. 7. You shall not steal. 8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. 10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.”

The first three commandments guide relationships with God, while the other seven guide relationships with fellow human beings. God's commandments are enough to guide every person, every institution, every organization, every nation, and our world. Our problem, as Jesus points out, is that human beings abandon God's commandments and cling to human traditions (Mark 7:8). While all human traditions (constitutions, laws, canons, ordinances, etc.) are imperfect, the psalmist testifies, “The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The decree of the Lord is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The command of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eye” (Psalm 19:8-9). Wherever God's commandments are not kept, the opposite becomes the case: disturbance of soul, folly, conflict, and blindness.

As we journey through the Lenten season, God draws our attention, again, to his commandments which are one of the Church's teachings given to us when we reach the age of reasoning to guide our spiritual and moral development. Today, God invites us to remember our very beginning that we may have forgotten, we may have neglected, and we may have fallen short. Is my life still guided by God's commandments? Which of them do I need to work on during this Lenten season?

Today's gospel tells us how the temple area, which was supposed to be a holy ground and serene place of prayer, was turned into a marketplace. Those who came for the feast of Passover were required to pay temple tax for the upkeep of the temple. Since the Roman and Greek coins had images of their gods and their emperors stamped on them and therefore were regarded as pagan coins which could not be used to pay the temple tax, money-changers stayed in the temple area and exchanged the pagan coins for Jewish coins. The money-changers cheated the people by offering them a very low exchange rate. Also, sacrificial animals were not to be brought from outside but must be bought from the sellers in the temple area. The sellers sold the animals at exorbitant prices. It was because of these corrupt practices in the name of God that Jesus “made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace’” (John 2:15-16).

Unfortunately, there are churches, religious houses, religious grounds, and their leaders who commit the sin of turning places of worship into business centers and market places. They extort, cheat, and steal in the name of God. They stand condemned by Jesus' words and actions in today's gospel.

In today's gospel, while Jesus speaks of his body as the temple, the Jews speak of the physical temple building. As followers of Jesus, St. Paul asks us, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19). During this Lenten season, let us present our bodies to Jesus to cleanse us as he cleansed the temple area that we may be a renewed dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. May he cleanse us physically and spiritually. Amen.

We conclude with the song, "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus" by Robert Lowry (1876).

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP