

### Third Sunday of Lent – Year B

In today's readings we can see references to signs as well as encouragement to recall the wisdom of the Scriptures. Seeing the fulfilment of Scripture enables us to appreciate the divine plan for humanity.

#### **Exodus 20:1-17**

In one sense the listing of the Ten Commandments is familiar to us; probably so familiar that we miss some of the choice ideas contained in the passage. Deuteronomy 5 refers to these as the ten words, the ten statements from God. The text of Exodus uses the word *mitzvot*, the plural of *mitzvah* which means a command, an obligation, but more in keeping with the context of today's passage, the terms of a contract or agreement.

The key idea in this and the next four chapters is that God is setting up a relationship with the people of Israel. This is called a covenant, in Hebrew a *berit*, which quite likely derives from *biritu*, the word for a clasp or shackle, hence treaty, in the Akkadian language, a Semitic tongue of ancient Mesopotamia. A covenant in the time of Moses was more than a mutual agreement between two parties. It involved serious obligations to which both parties bound themselves. These were the terms of the contract. In today's reading God speaks of having delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt in virtue of being their Lord and God. The covenant relationship is described as, 'I am your God, you are my people.'

In view of this close relationship, God sets forth a summary of actions that a party in a relationship would be very careful about in order to maintain the dignity of the relationship. All of these obligations are listed in the future tense in Hebrew. So, we ought to read them as God speaking like this: because we are committed to a relational contract, I will keep my part of the deal and you won't worship other gods, you won't murder or steal or lie, you will honour your parents and respect family, you will set aside one day in the week to stop work and reflect on your relationship with me, your God...and so on. These are all natural consequences of being connected, as a people, with the *Shekhinah*, the Presence. The verb used for keeping these instructions (*mitzvot*) is *shamar*, which means to guard, be loyal to, be careful about. It follows that violating or disrespecting any of these responsibilities means doing some damage to relationships with God, self and others.

#### **Psalms 18/19**

Our translation of the eighth verse of the psalm reads, 'The Law of the Lord is perfect,' which is not incorrect, but the Hebrew says: the Torah of the Lord, that is, the way of the Lord, the instructions of the Lord are complete and the proclamations of Lord are trustworthy. Following the statement of the Ten Commandments this psalm would seem to be elevating the value of law. In actual fact, the Lectionary editors' choice of these verses here does not do justice to the whole intent and character of the complete psalm. This song of praise is a reflection on creation that gives credit to the imagination of the Creator. The poet's conclusion is that God's way of doing things is obviously brilliant, beautiful and wondrous. Doing things God's way is sheer wisdom.

### **Our lives will not be judged on our beliefs or our piety, but rather on our self-giving love.**

#### **1 Corinthians 1:22-25**

Remember the Pharisees, mentioned by Mark (8:11), asking Jesus for a sign to test his authenticity. A similar situation arises in today's gospel. Paul implies that they need a sign because the thought of a messiah who was crucified, that is, condemned as a criminal is utterly outrageous. Likewise, the Greeks need something that makes sense to them and Christian faith strikes them as ludicrously stupid. Both groups are unable to take the heart of the Christian message on trust. When Paul writes of faith, he is really referring to trust.

I think all of us pass through times of uncertainty in our Christian faith and yet Jesus never spoke of certainty, he spoke of faith that expresses itself in trust and a life of integrity, love and compassion. The quest for certainty has plagued the administrative arm of our church for centuries giving rise to an emphasis on authority, power and control. Fundamentalism and literal readings of Scripture are also indicators of the egotism that cannot trust because of a consuming need for certainty and control – this is not faith. We are now paying the price of certainty. Our lives will not be judged on our beliefs or our piety, but rather on our self-giving love revealed in our compassion and care for others. Jesus spelt this out pretty clearly, 'When I was hungry you fed me...when I was in prison you visited me...and so on (Matthew 25:31-46).

#### **John 2:13-25**

Today's gospel reading follows the episode of the wedding at Cana and John concludes that event with a very simple, homely and relational matter of fact, 'After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.'

With a clean break the writer describes Jesus arriving at Jerusalem for the feast of Pesach, Passover. This is the great freedom festival of the Jewish year commemorating the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. Jesus goes into the temple through the large outer courtyard, the Court of the Gentiles. This is where the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice went on. It was effectively a marketplace where pilgrims would exchange their street money for temple coinage, which had no graven image on it, and then purchase an animal for sacrifice. They also had to pay the temple tax with temple coinage. It seems likely, that priests had authorised an overflow of sellers to set up shop in the next inner court, which was a holy area. Whatever the case, it is clear that the whole cacophonous setup made Jesus' blood boil and he exploded. This temple commerce was a source of great income for the city, but Jesus saw it as a rip-off bazaar for the priests. Did the disciples see his angry performance as out of character? Who knows?

What is clear is that the Johannine writer portrays the incident as a symbol that the temple with its sacrificial system and ritual is at an end. In the three Synoptic gospels the event occurs at the end of Jesus' ministry and appears to be the last straw that pushes the chief priests to plot his arrest and death. John, by contrast, places this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and associates it with the feast of Passover to indicate that, in the reign of God, Jewish temple, animal sacrifices and holy days are unnecessary and therefore obsolete.

In his typical way, the Johannine author again scorns the inadequacy and narrowness of reading Jesus literally, without any sense of vision or imagination. He does this with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the crowd that went off in disgust thinking he was inviting them to cannibalise his flesh and blood. Now he is speaking of his body as a temple that will rise again, but his opponents just don't get it. Jesus the poet wants us not to figure him out but to enter into the wonder and mystery of his dream of life in the reign of God, which we can sign on to here and now.

### **Our growth in the spiritual life is all about our relationships.**

The last part of this extract is a transitional paragraph into the episode with Nicodemus. The writer makes a very subtle point that many believed in Jesus when they saw the signs he did. However, we will see how the 'many' will desert him when he gets arrested. John is saying that Jesus was well aware of those who professed commitment to him but would abandon him when the crunch came. John affirms that Jesus knew human nature pretty well.

One issue that can be confusing when we read in the gospels of people believing in Jesus is that in this culture belief was equivalent to trust in and commitment to. Over the centuries Catholicism has taken on the guise of a system of beliefs. It is virtually a binary black and white situation – if you believe the right things you are in, if you don't believe you are a heretic and you are out. Nothing in this notion has anything to do with Jesus or his message, but the formula is definitely part of the agenda of control. Going back to the mind of Jesus, which is what Pope Francis is urging, we see that our growth in the spiritual life is all about our relationships with God, ourself, the other, and the created environment. These are 'doing' things set on the foundation of correct priorities (*seek first the reign of God*) and the teachings and attitudes of Jesus. By reading and becoming familiar with one or more of the gospels we get to know the attitudes, priorities and teachings of Jesus. These are what we live by.



...but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

Matthew 19:14

Your priorities reveal your character.

Anonymous



It was past midnight and they were still sitting on the sofa in the front room. He appeared in no hurry to leave.

'My father's very handy about the house,' she said suddenly. 'Sometimes he takes things apart to see why they won't go.'

He took the hint and left hurriedly.

Laurie Woods