

SERMON NOTES: LENT 3

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-25

Exodus 20:1-17

There are many ways of reading and understanding the passage we have in today's reading from Exodus but as with all biblical interpretation, the simplest explanation is usually the best and the most accurate. As we have seen so often, the most important question we need to ask ourselves about any bible story is this one: What does this reading tell me about God? It is with this fundamental question that we will proceed with our reflections.

The story of the Exodus so far has been an amazing story of the power and mercy of God. He has heard the cries of his people, listened to their pain and their suffering and has responded in a most spectacular manner. With great signs and wonders, and as the song in Chapter fifteen tells us: *Your right arm Yahweh is filled with power, your right arm Yahweh has shattered our enemies.* That is the kind of God Yahweh shows himself to be: a God filled with power and strength who comes to the aid of his people.

After his great victory over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, God parts the waters of the Sea of Reeds and leads his people into the wilderness. That was a terrifying place for the largely citified people who made up the Hebrew community. How could they venture out there and survive? How would they find their way? What would they eat? Where would they find water? And what about those terrible and frightening tribes of Amalekites who preyed on any wandering bands of refugees silly enough to wander into their territory? The chapters leading up to the account of the giving of the ten commandments have answered all of these questions.

God is all powerful. He defeated Pharaoh and his petty gods and has led his chosen people through the waters of the sea into the barren desert. He leads them by day with a pillar of cloud and comforts them by night with a pillar of fire. He sets up his tent in their midst and speaks with Moses their leader. He feeds them with manna and quail and even provides water from a rock. Then, when the Amalekite raiders come down, Yahweh defeats them in battle. That is the kind of God he is. He is not some remote god locked away in heaven. He is a God who comes down and soils his hands in helping his people in their need.

It is in this context we need to read the ten commandments. With God's generous love and mercy, with his power and his might, along with his blessings and compassion there come some divine expectations. As God shows himself to be the God of the Hebrews he expects that in return he will be seen as the God of the Hebrews and they will live in a manner which reflects that covenant relationship.

In this context it does not sound all that complicated but it is a message that many in our modern western world find hard to accept and live by: God has expectations. God makes demands and he expects us to live accordingly. Our passage begins by saying: *Then God spoke these words. He said....*" These laws are not the invention of a human mind. They are not the result of lawyers, or governments or academics. This is the way God expects us to live.

In some ways we are taken back to the opening chapters of Genesis where we see Adam and Eve in the garden and God offers them a rich collections of blessings. At the end of the story of the blessings of the garden he points out that there are a couple of trees, the fruits of which they are not to eat. If they eat of those fruits they will surely die. Human beings have limits. We are not in absolute control of our own lives, the lives of others or the world into which we are generously placed by God. The ten commandments are about those limits.

A read through them will show that they are about the place of God in our lives and the love and respect that we must show to other people in our community, to family members and to the strangers among us. They are about the need to sacrifice ourselves for the love of God and for the love we must have to others. They are about enriching, protecting and supporting the community. To see them as being some kind of kill joy legislation is to miss the point. God wants Israel to live in the land of Canaan in such a way that they will be able to value and appreciate the milk and honey that he is offering. By living in the way He sets out, they will not be overwhelmed by selfish sin and human weakness. But the choice will be theirs.

John 2:13-25

The Gospel reading takes up this theme and expands it and does so in a way that is so characteristic of St John. The other Gospels have the cleansing of the temple associated with the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem just prior to his passion and death. For John, it is related to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and is therefore in some way an insight to the ministry that will follow. So what is John saying?

John picks up a theme that can be found in our story of Exodus. For him the crucial thing about a life of faith is the life that we lead. Faith is not about the observance of laws. It is not about faithfulness to customs, to religious practices, to traditions and to liturgical ways that have been handed on from generation to generation. Faith is about our life with God, about how we live in the communities in which we find ourselves. This is why we find this story at the opening of John's Gospel. By his life and teachings, Jesus will challenge what has been put forward as the righteous traditions of the Jewish Religion. He will speak of a renewed way of being a faithful Hebrew, a way he taught was set out by God, a way that will turn upside down the way their religion operated and saw itself. Ultimately, his ministry in tackling the narrow mindedness of Judaism would bring about his death. Religion can cope with most things, but it does not cope well with challenges and the priests show this by the way they dealt with Jesus.

The image created here is one a powerful one. Jesus went into the Temple and he "drove out the sellers.....scattered the money sellers.....knocked over the tables...." and scolded those who engaged in these activities. There is nothing of the gentle Jesus in this picture. He is cross, angry and aggressive in what he did and you can imagine the turmoil he left behind as the temple police tried to restore order and the people tried to find their coins and lost animals. But it was the leaders of the Jews who were most upset. Why was that? It was because the priests, the Pharisees and the Sadducees had the most to lose. This was their religion and here we have Jesus seeming to tell them that the things they held so near and dear were an insult to the God they thought they were serving.

What was important in the Kingdom introduced and proclaimed by Jesus was not the Temple and all that went on in it. What is important is the life people were prepared to live with him. What is going to unfold in this Gospel story is a new life. In the very next Chapter of the Gospel, Jesus will tell Nicodemus that anyone who wants to be a true child of God has to be born "from above". Today's story is a preparation for that teaching. Some of the old ways have to go. There is nothing in the old ways that is beyond change, beyond renewal, beyond being torn down. "Tear it down" says Jesus, speaking about the Temple and I will raise it up again in three days. "Tear it down" and I will replace it with the true Temple, the Temple of myself.

This is such a major change that it must have upset people. It challenged them enough to put Jesus to death. In the other Gospels you can see why this story is related to the death of Jesus

on the cross. With him there can be no compromise in life, not hiding behind religious ways and practices. What counts is how close a person is willing to join themselves with him.

Conclusion:

There are two very significant messages for us here and they are both appropriate for the season of Lent. The first is a clear reminder that God has set out for us a way of life. He has expectations, commandments that we need to follow. We are asked: are we fulfilling the demands made of us through the teachings of his Son? Is what we read in the Gospel the way of life that is evident in the way we live, the way our faith community shapes itself? These are the commandments given to us by God and he expects us to live in that way.

It is all too easy in our modern world for us to think of the Gospel commandments (Matthew 5,6,7 for example) as some kind of ideal that would be good for us to achieve but are not obligatory. Our reading from Exodus tell us otherwise. God fills us with many blessings, the milk and honey of the bible. In return, he expects us to meet his commands. Lent is the time when we measure ourselves against these commandments, where we set out in our own hearts and minds what it is God wants and commit ourselves to be more faithful. In Gospel terms, it is the season when we turn over the tables of the things we have allowed to creep into our lives with God, drive out the things that come between us and our God and scatter those thoughts and words that are contrary to a Gospel way of life.

The second challenge, and this is in some ways a tougher ask, is to look at the way our religion brings us closer to God and to examine the ways it might actually have become a barrier to an intimate life with God. Fulfilling our religious ways might mean that we are doing enough in our Kingdom living. It is easy to go to Church each week and to “do” all of the things that are asked of us in our parish activities but still find ourselves at a distance from God. It is easy to allow our religious practices to make us feel content in our life with God and we need a time when someone comes in and refreshes that life, challenges it and gives us an opportunity to bring in some changes. But that is hard, as we saw with Jesus. It cost him his life just as change and renewal will cost us pain and difficulty.

No one ever said that a life of discipleship is without cost. We are called to change. We are invited to allow God to come deeper into our lives and transform us. We are called to change our own lives and the way our faith communities live out their discipleship, so that the world around us may come to know, love and serve the God we know, love and serve. It is not so much about us as about our religious life in the world. Lent is a time to make ourselves more faithful so that the world is filled with blessings and it is that hope that makes the hard work of Lent so worthwhile. As the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross brought salvation to all, so we too, as we take up our crosses this Lent, have a chance of opening up for others the saving grace of God’s love.