

3rd Sunday of Lent – Cycle B

Note: The readings given for Cycle A may be used in place of the Cycle B readings.

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Exodus 20:1-17

Our first reading today is the giving of the ten commandments. The time is three months after the Israelites left on their exodus from Egypt. During this three months they have come to a place called Marah (the name means “bitter”) which had bitter water; the people grumbled against Moses, then God has Moses cast a piece of wood into the water and it becomes sweet.

From there they go into the Desert of Sin where the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron because they are hungry; then Moses and Aaron tell the people of the food which will be provided and God gives them manna and quail (Numbers 11 tells us that the quail poisoned those who continued to grumble).

Next, they went to Rephidim where the people quarreled with Moses because there was no water. Moses says to them “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the Test?;” and God tells Moses to strike the rock at Horeb (Sinai) with his staff and water flows.

Then they are attacked by the Amalekites and defeat them (they win as long as Moses’ hands are up, so Aaron and Hur hold his hands up). After the battle Jethro [Moses’ father-in-law and a priest of Midian (an Arabian nomadic tribe)] visits and convinces Moses to appoint representatives among the people so that every time there is a dispute, Moses doesn’t have to personally resolve it.

Now, they have entered the Desert of Sinai and are camped at the base of Mount Sinai. To best understand the context of today’s first reading, we will begin reading at Exodus 19:3 and continue through the prescribed reading.

19:3 Moses went up the mountain to God. Then the LORD called to him and said, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob; ⁴ tell the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. ⁵ Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. ⁶ You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites.” ⁷ So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people. When he set before them all that the LORD had ordered him to tell them, ⁸ the people

all answered together, "Everything the LORD has said, we will do." Then Moses brought back to the LORD the response of the people.⁹ The LORD also told him, "I am coming to you in a dense cloud, so that when the people hear me speaking with you, they may always have faith in you also." When Moses, then, had reported to the LORD the response of the people,¹⁰ the LORD added, "Go to the people and have them sanctify themselves today and tomorrow. Make them wash their garments¹¹ and be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai before the eyes of all the people.¹² Set limits for the people all around the mountain, and tell them: Take care not to go up the mountain, or even to touch its base. If anyone touches the mountain, he must be put to death.¹³ No hand shall touch him; he must be stoned to death or killed with arrows. Such a one, man or beast, must not be allowed to live. Only when the ram's horn resounds may they go up to the mountain."¹⁴ Then Moses came down from the mountain to the people and had them sanctify themselves and wash their garments.¹⁵ He warned them, "Be ready for the third day. Have no intercourse with any woman."¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.¹⁷ But Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain.¹⁸ Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the LORD came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.¹⁹ The trumpet blast grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God answering him with thunder.²⁰ When the LORD came down to the top of Mount Sinai, he summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up to him.²¹ Then the LORD told Moses, "Go down and warn the people not to break through toward the LORD in order to see him; otherwise many of them will be struck down.²² The priests, too, who approach the LORD must sanctify themselves; else he will vent his anger upon them."²³ Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot go up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us to set limits around the mountain to make it sacred."²⁴ The LORD repeated, "Go down now! Then come up again along with Aaron. But the priests and the people must not break through to come up to the LORD; else he will vent his anger upon them."²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them this.^{20:1} Then God delivered all these commandments:

The stone tablets don't come until Exodus 31:18 (11 chapters later). Notice that the commandments aren't numbered. Anglican, Greek, and Reformed traditions count the prohibitions against false worship as two, while combining the ones about coveting the neighbor's goods and wife. Lutheran and Catholic traditions count the prohibitions against false worship as one and separately count the coveting of goods and wife. Modern Jews count "I, the LORD, am your God" as the first, combine the prohibitions against false worship and also combine the ones against coveting. The end result in all cases is that there are ten commandments and all the prohibitions are contained therein; no commandment has been left out.

² "I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of

slavery. ³ You shall not have other gods besides me. ⁴ You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth;

This does not prohibit the use of statues, just those which are worshiped. Excavations of pagan shrines have revealed several images of gods within them. Since God has led the Israelites from Egypt (where they worshiped goats, bulls and lambs alongside the Egyptians) He has defeated these pagan gods and has shown Himself superior. If this were a prohibition against all images, God wouldn't have directed the making of cherubim (Exodus 25:18) or pomegranates (Exodus 28:33) or a serpent (Numbers 21:8); to name but a few examples.

⁵ you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; ⁶ but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain. For the LORD will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.

This does not refer just to cussing. Swearing an oath ("I swear to God," "With God as my witness," "so help me God") when not telling the truth is also using His name in vain.

⁸ "Remember to keep holy the sabbath day. ⁹ Six days you may labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you. ¹¹ In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

So far as has been discovered, the Sabbath is a peculiarly Israelite institution. The rhythm of time was created along with everything else in the first week (Genesis 1:1-2:3). This is the only commandment where lapse of memory results in mortal sin.

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

In the traditional and largely oral society of the Israelites, elders were respected as the repositories of tradition. Parents also depended upon their children to care for them in old age (instead of Social Security and Medicare). This is the only commandment with a reward.

¹³ "You shall not kill.

Human life is sacred, murder is forbidden. Killing in battle or by capital punishment is not

the issue here, both of these are approved in Exodus 21:12-17 and Deuteronomy 20:1-14.

14 “You shall not commit adultery. 15 “You shall not steal.

Some commentators say this commandment not to steal refers to kidnapping as normal theft is covered by the 9th commandment (10th commandment as some groups number them). They say that this commandment prohibits the enslavement of a free Israelite by force, whether for personal use or for trade.

16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything else that belongs to him.”

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

The Corinthian church was divided [I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas, I follow Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12)]. Believers must detach themselves from the standards of fallen humanity (which is the cause of the divisions in the Corinthian church) if they are to understand the way God relates to them. God, through His Son, Jesus, established only one Church and we are not free to pick and choose what we will accept and what we won’t.

22 Jews demand signs

The Jews expected, and even demanded, signs (spectacular miracles that showed divine intervention). They looked for a messiah who would inaugurate their nation’s sovereignty over the Gentiles by a display of miraculous power.

and Greeks look for wisdom,

The Greeks searched for philosophies that pretended to give a satisfactory explanation of man and the cosmos.

“The Jews seek signs because they do not reject the possibility that things like this can happen. What they want to know is whether it has actually occurred, like Aaron’s rod, which sprouted and bore fruit (see Numbers 17:8), and Jonah who spent three days and nights in the belly of the whale before being spewed out alive (Jonah 1:17-2:10). But the Greeks seek wisdom, refusing to believe anything which does not accord with human reason.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews

Deuteronomy 21:23 says that a man who is hanged on a tree is cursed by God. This man

Jesus, whom the Christians proclaim, not only did not overthrow the Romans, He was hung on a cross (a tree) like a common criminal.

and foolishness to Gentiles,

No way can they rationalize this man to be what the Christians claim.

“Since the world had become puffed up by the vanity of its dogmas, the Lord set in place the faith whereby the believers would be saved by what seemed unworthy and foolish, so that, all human conjecture being of no avail, only the grace of God might reveal what the human mind cannot take in.” [Pope Saint Leo the Great (after A.D. 461), *Sermons*].

²⁴ but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Even though the gospel is addressed to all, only some will have the grace to accept it. Man believes because God calls him (Romans 9:16), man must put aside his selfishness to accept the call. In Christ, crucified and risen, God reveals to the called (the members of His Church) His wisdom and His saving acts.

“When Jews believe in Christ, they understand that He is the power of God. When Greeks believe in Him, they understand that He is the wisdom of God. He is God’s power because the Father does everything through Him. He is God’s wisdom because God is known through Him. It would not be possible for God to be known through anyone who was not from Him in the first place. No one has seen the Father except the Son and whomever the Son has chosen to reveal Him to.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

God’s ways are not man’s ways.

The verse of this reading which says “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” is the reason why the Catholic Church displays a crucifix rather than an empty cross. It is not because we do not worship the resurrected Christ, but because the Scriptures tell us that we must recognize that without the crucifixion, there would have been no resurrection.

Deuteronomy 21:23 says that a man who is hanged on a tree is cursed by God and Jesus truly bore that curse for all mankind. In Genesis 2:16-17 we read “*The LORD God gave man this order: ‘You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.’*” Adam was in a covenant relationship with his creator, and the

curse of disobedience in that relationship was death (spiritual death as well as physical death). His single act of disobedience closed heaven for all mankind until the perfect sacrifice could be offered “*Therefore, he must not be allowed to put out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever.*’ The LORD God therefore banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken. When he expelled the man, he settled him east of the garden of Eden; and he stationed the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:22-24).

Like the lamb of the Passover meal, Jesus was blameless and unblemished; only He could offer this one perfect sacrifice which would restore man’s covenant relationship with God and open heaven so that we can approach God and have our sins forgiven and forgotten. At the moment of His death on the altar of the cross, heaven was opened. This was indicated to all by the tearing of the temple veil, the curtain which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies in the Temple (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). “[J]ust as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:18-19).

The crucifix, which depicts this once for all sacrifice, becomes for us the tree of life as we are reminded that we can approach God, have our sins forgiven and forgotten, and join with Him in the sacrificial banquet which renews our covenant relationship with Him. Just as in the original Passover, we must *eat the sacrifice* (the Eucharist) if we are to live.

Gospel - John 2:13-25

The time is two years before Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. This is His first trip to Jerusalem and the Temple since the start of His public ministry. There is a parallel account of the cleansing of the Temple in the synoptic gospels which occurs during passion week (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Many commentators believe that this incident is a separate one from the parallel account and I agree.

¹³ Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

This is the first of three Passover celebrations mentioned in John’s gospel; the second is at the feeding of the five thousand and the third is at Jesus’ passion.

¹⁴ He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves,

Various sacrificial animals were for sale at the Temple so that the pilgrims would not have the inconvenience of bringing their own.

as well as the money-changers seated there.

The only money accepted at the Temple was the Tyrian half-shekel. Roman coins could not be used. Both the sellers and the coin changers performed a necessary function – if they conducted their endeavors honestly.

15 He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen,

Since the number of animals and changers must have been large, the whip probably served as a symbol of authority rather than an instrument for inflicting punishment. He may also have had the assistance of His disciples in this endeavor.

and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, ¹⁶ and to those who sold doves he said, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”

The sacrificial system of Judaism has turned the Temple into a marketplace rather than a house of worship.

17 His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Quotes Psalm 69:10. “Recalling the words” (remembering) is a technical term in John for the process by which the community came to see Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture after the resurrection.

18 At this the Jews answered

Most likely the Temple authorities,

and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

Demands for “signs” are continually being made of Jesus. In this case, the requested sign appears to be to clear up the issue of “by whose authority” does Jesus act.

19 Jesus answered and said to them, * “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

Although they don’t recognize it as such now, the “sign” which tells them by whose authority He speaks, will be His resurrection.

20 The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?”

Taken literally, Jesus' saying is absurd. Herod had begun the Temple about 20 B.C. (16 B.C. if Jesus is 30 at this point). Work continued until about A.D. 62 (a period of some 82 years) when the Jewish revolt started.

21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

This is the work of the evangelist – clarifying the symbolic meaning of Jesus' saying: The new Temple will be Jesus' resurrected body.

22 Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

The gospels frequently testify that the full significance of Jesus' words and deeds were only understood in the light of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words refer as much to the Church as they do to the resurrection.

23 While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.

In Semitic usage the "name" is equivalent to the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a proposition, it is commitment to a person.

24 But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, ²⁵ and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

A faith based merely on miracles without a proper recognition of the nature of Him who performed them would prove to be unstable and inconsistent.