

3rd Sunday of Lent (B)
(Exodus 20:1-17 / John 2:13-25)
07.03.2021
Respect

Dear brothers and sisters,

Probably from our childhood days most of us will be familiar with the text from the Book of Exodus heard in today's first reading. I am sure that we will have recognized the famous Ten Commandments: God's gift of the Law to his people given through Moses. The 'seniors' among us will recall that we had to learn the Ten Commandments by heart in our Catechism class if we wanted to 'make our first Holy Communion', as we used to say!

When we read the Ten Commandments, we have to be careful not to reduce this text to a list of orders or restrictions. The Ten Commandments are not just ten instructions: 'do this or don't do that'. How important it is for us not to reduce this powerful text to an austere and exacting moral code. That approach is hardly uplifting. We have to take on board the whole text. When we include the first verse we hear: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery". So, far from being just only a list of ten positive or negative commandments to confine us, this text reminds us that the Lord has liberated his people from slavery in Egypt. This text is given to us to set us free, just as the Lord set his people free, giving them ten 'words' of life to help them to remain free and not fall into slavery again. What we call the Ten Commandments is above all a confession of faith in God who loves and cares for his people, who liberates his people from the slavery of sin and wants them to remain free.

If we want to summarize these Ten Commandments in one word, I think we can say that these commandments invite us 'to respect' God, ourselves and others. To respect! 'Respect' is an interesting word. In re-spect, we have the word 'spect' that we find in 'spectacle' for example, and the word 're' which evokes a backward movement, a distance. To respect someone is to look at this person while keeping a certain distance from him or her. Respect implies a relationship, a relationship of communion but without fusion. To respect others is to look at them without invading them, without abusing them, without violating them. The Ten Commandments are an invitation to respect God, others and ourselves in order to remain free and help others to remain free.

"You shall have no gods except me" is a call to respect God, that is to say to allow him to be the Lord of our lives without taking his place or giving his place to someone or something else. If we don't respect God and take his place, if we behave as if we were God, we don't really love Him; we fail to serve Him as we should. We become slaves of ourselves, in fact slaves of a pitiable master. If we look at someone or something else as our God, we become its slave.

We are called to respect ourselves and not become slaves of what we do. The law of Sabbath observance speaks volumes in this regard. We are invited to work, to work well, to work courageously and generously, but without becoming a slave of our work. It is for this reason that the Law of the Sabbath invites us not to work one day a week. None of us is only or even mainly

what we do. We are more than what we do. We are beloved children of God. When we practice the law of the Sabbath, we truly respect ourselves, we situate ourselves in truth.

All the other commandments are about respect of others and of their possessions:

Honour your father and your mother, you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet. All these commandments invite us to respect our neighbour, all our neighbours and their possessions.

Respecting God, our neighbour and ourselves is the way to remain free in the liberty God gave us and in which we are called to grow to our full stature as human beings.

In today's gospel passage, we see Jesus become angry against people selling cattle and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting at their counters in the Temple. Jesus is really angry: "Making a whip out of some cord, he drove them all out of the Temple, cattle and sheep as well, scattered the money changers' coins, knocked their tables over and said to the pigeons sellers, 'take all this out of here and stop turning my Father's house into a market'". Jesus does not become angry because he does not control himself or because he has a tendency to lose his head. Jesus becomes angry here because he wants to draw attention to the fact that these people don't respect the Temple, the place where God has chosen to live in the midst of his people. Once again we are brought back to the same notion of respect. The lack of respect of these people consists in the fact that they use the Temple for another purpose than the purpose designated by God: they transform a house of prayer into a market place, they transform the place where they are invited to meet with God into a place where they do business and make a profit!

This episode of Jesus in the Temple and the Jews' demand that Jesus justify his behaviour is an opportunity for St John to play with the meaning of the word Temple. This is something he often does when he speaks of signs and symbols in his gospel. If the Temple was the place chosen by God to dwell in the midst of his people, what St John wants us to grasp is that Jesus is now the new way whereby God now dwells among his people. The body of Jesus is the new sanctuary. All that is encapsulated in the verse: "Destroy this sanctuary and in three day I will raise it up". The Jews thought Jesus was speaking of the Temple. In fact he was speaking of himself, his body. Jesus is the new Temple.

By this verse, we are brought back to the goal of our Lenten pilgrimage: the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Church, the mystical body of Christ, is the new place of the Lord's presence in today's world. When we respect God, others and ourselves, we make God present in today's world. When we don't respect God, others and ourselves we hinder God from being seen and met by all those who seek him and wait to see him. Our responsibility is huge.

As we continue our Lenten pilgrimage, let us ask the Lord for the grace of respectful hearts and minds!