

### **Third Sunday of Lent B/2009**

The psychology of behavior teaches us that children who grow up without any guiding law end up by becoming wild, like animals. Like them, they act according to the mood of their character and obey only what their instincts dictate them to do. With such a behavior, it is possible to find them in trouble with society and its social regulations.

What psychology tries to tell us is that the law is important. It shapes human behavior and determines our character. It structures our living together as individuals and society. It facilitates our relationship with one another and helps us recognize the limits of our individual freedom and the respect we owe to others. Without law, life becomes a jungle where only the strongest have the right to live and to exist. The law is important not only for the functioning of human society, but also for our relationship with God.

Today's readings deal with the reality of God's law and the benefit of fulfilling it in the spirit of our covenant with the Lord. The first reading recalls the Law God gave to Moses in order to consolidate his relation with Israel. It is the same law that shapes us as God's people and brothers and sisters inside the church. As in the relationship of marriage, the law is given to us as the guaranty of our relationship with the Lord. It sets our obligations and duties toward God and toward our fellow humans. Not to respect the law is to let life become a chaos. However, the law has to be fulfilled in the spirit of God's covenant and not according to human interests.

All that helps us understand Jesus' reaction in today's Gospel as he drove out of the temple the merchants and stallholders. But why did Jesus come to overturn oxen, sheep, doves and the table of money-changers? Were these activities illegitimate or unlawful?

These activities in the temple were not unlawful; they were allowed by the Law. In fact, in order to worship in the temple, people needed animals to be offered for the sacrifice, as required by the book of Leviticus. However, how could the atmosphere in the temple be contemplative and reverential when economic interests prevail over God's worship? Of course, some would come in the temple with a real intention of worshiping God. But others also would be interested only in their profits and commercial benefits.

If so, we can say that Jesus was pushed to act in such a way because God's house was being desecrated. Those who came in the temple worshiped without reverence of the sacred place, the dwelling place of God. Worship without reverence is a worship that is formalistic, which is done only in order to obey the law, but with the heart far from the Lord.

Jesus acted as he did in order to teach us that any worship of God that is done only in order to obey the law without true conversion of heart is irrelevant before him. Any sacrifice we bring in the Church should be an expression of what lies in our heart. After all, a true sacrifice to God is our very self. That is why the true worship of God is done in spirit and in truth, and not that which is formal and

external. God is not interested in hypocritical display, but in sincere contrition of heart and conversion.

Moreover, by driving out the merchants from the temple, Jesus reminds us that our relationship with God is not a matter of trade. Any time we forget this truth we degrade religion by using it for economic interests. This is a permanent temptation before us. Sometimes, I feel embarrassed when after a session of pastoral counseling someone asks of me: “How much, Father, shall I pay you”? I do not sell the service I offer. If someone would like to support me or the Church, that is fine. But, my service is not to be sold.

By driving out of the temple money-changers and those who were with them, Jesus wanted to purify the temple so that it would gain its original meaning as a place of prayer, healing and blessing. This particular point challenges us profoundly about our attitude in the Church before, during and after the Holy Mass. I know that given the way our society functions, it is not always easy to frequently meet friends and socialize. In that sense, Sunday becomes an opportunity to meet friends we did not see in the week and chat a little bit about some issues of life. However, we should not forget that the Church is a place of prayer, not only during the Mass, but at any time.

The last point I would like to bring is relative to the destruction of the temple Jesus is talking about: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”. Remember, a house does not have only a physical meaning; it can have also a symbolic or a spiritual meaning. Sometimes we say of people who hardly open to others that they are locked in themselves. In this regard, a person can be like a house.

Organized worship and laws for participating in it make sense only if our worship is motivated by spirit and truth, if it leads us to true conversion. In this time of Lent, we are called to become ourselves the temples of the Lord. We have to obey God’s commandments, but always for the glory of God and never for our own satisfaction or for being seen by the people. May God bless each one of you as we walk together to the celebration of our redemption in Jesus Christ! God bless you all!

**Exodus 20, 1-17; 1 Corinthians 1, 22-25; John 2, 13-25**



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