

Third Sunday of Lent B/2012

The readings of this third Sunday of Lent talk about the Law of God. They invite us to realize that the Law of God should be internalized in our hearts so that our worship might be done in truth and in spirit. The failure to do so will lead us to a lack of the necessary wisdom needed in order to appreciate God's gift and our obligations in the relationship with God.

The first reading of the book of Exodus recalls the commandments God gave to the Hebrews in order to seal his covenant with them. It starts with the affirmation of God's sovereignty over Israel as his Lord. It also states the religious and moral obligations that the people have to fulfill in order to guarantee their relation with God.

In its variety and display, the commandments aim at preserving the integrity of Israel as an exclusive people of God. They call the people to fulfill their obligations toward God without neglecting their duties toward their fellow human beings. For that reason, the commandments refer to both human being and God to whom respect and faithfulness are due in the spirit of the covenant.

What is behind this text is the idea of God as the liberator of his people. Because it is he who has allowed Israel to become a nation, it is normal that he demands of them unconditional obedience. In that sense, the commandments are the guaranty of the relationship God wants to establish with his people. They play the role of a road map in order to make the relationship with God and our fellows strong. Like in civil society where the absence of the law is detrimental to a good functioning of society, the commandments are vital to our relationship with God and with one another. In order to achieve such a goal, however, the commandments have to be fulfilled in the spirit of God's covenant and not according to human interests.

All that helps us understand the anger of Jesus in today's Gospel as he drove out of the temple money changers and all the merchants with their products. First of all, the Gospel says that Jesus went up to Jerusalem and found in the temple area merchants and money changers seated there. Infuriated by the spectacle he saw, he made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple by overturning tables and stalls.

As he was chasing them out by reproaching them for having made the house of his Father a market place, he declared himself being consumed by the zeal for the house of his Father. Meanwhile the Jews asked him for a sign that could prove to them that he had the authority to do so.

Without giving them a sign, Jesus answered that if they destroy the temple, he could rebuild it in three days. That was truly astonishing because, in truth, it took the Jews forty-six years to build the temple in its present form. How could it be possible to rebuild it in three days? According to John, the question was not about the temple as a building, but rather about the temple of his body. It was, then, only after the resurrection that the disciples understood this mystery.

In spite of all that, however, many people who came to Jerusalem for the feast began to believe in the name of Jesus. On his part, Jesus would not trust himself to them, because he not only knew them, but he also knew their secret thoughts.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the sacredness of the house of the Lord. It is very striking in today's Gospel that the dispute of Jesus with the people is over the very understanding of what the temple is. In fact, the temple of Jerusalem was seen not only as a house consecrated to the service of God, but also as the personification of the presence of God in the midst of his people.

In that sense, it was not any house, but exclusively reserved to the praise and the glory of God. Like God himself to whom reverence and respect are due, it should enjoy the same treatment. However, that was not the case with those merchants who have transformed it into a house of trade. And that is what infuriated Jesus who wanted to purify the temple so that it finds its original meaning as a place of prayer, healing and blessing.

This episode challenges us seriously about our attitude in the Church before, during and after the Mass. It is true that considering the way society functions, it becomes difficult to meet friends and socialize during the week. Therefore, Sunday becomes an occasion of meeting them and chatting. However, we should not forget that the Church is above all a place of prayer, not only during the Mass, but at any time.

The second thing we learn is about the prevalence of internal worship over external cult. There is no doubt that the merchants in the temple were obeying the Law of Moses by providing to the pilgrims the holocausts required for the sacrifice. But, it is also true that while some came with a real intention of worshiping, others were led by a simple commercial interest.

In that context, it becomes clear that by chasing the venders from the temple, Jesus invites us to a sincere worship of God that is more internal than external. That is why a true adoration comes out of a contrite heart and not out of a mere fulfillment of external religious duties. Any worship of God that is done only in order to obey the law without conversion of heart is null and irrelevant.

The last point I want to bring is about the symbolism of the temple. In fact, a house does not have only a physical meaning; it can also have a symbolic connotation. When someone, for instance, is not very open we say that he/she is locked in himself or herself. In such a case, a person can be like a house.

I believe that, by inviting the Jews to destroy the temple so that he might rebuild it anew in three days, Jesus is inviting us to become the real house of the presence of God. In that sense, the new temple is not churches made of stones, but we, human beings, must become the dwelling place of God. That is the challenge we have for this time of Lent, namely to work hard in order to become the living temple of the presence of God. May God bless you all!

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



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