

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT B2021

Let me start this homily with a simple question: What is Lent? Lent is a time of a battle against the evil, a time of making a firm decision for God, but also a time of true worship and true adoration of God. The readings of this third Sunday of Lent invite us to that goal so that we discover the true worship that is pleasing to God.

The 1st reading reminds us of the importance of the law that God gave to Israel and, through Israel, to us. The law or the commandments have two components. The first set deals with the duties and obligations toward God and the second set with our responsibilities toward our fellow human beings. These two elements make up a unity; they cannot be separated except for the sake of explanation.

One cannot say that he is interested only in God and he has nothing to do with his fellow humans, and vice versa. Both humanitarians who care only for human beings as well as the spiritualists who are concerned only with God are misleading. We can only hold both and at the same time.

What is the true essence of God's commandments? In order to answer adequately this question, we have to know that Israel was not the only people on earth that had good and just laws, promulgated in the name of God. The history of humanity shows several collections of laws published by the sovereigns of ancient time. What makes the difference between them is, first of all, the way these laws were formulated.

The laws of other nations always begin by setting a condition to which is related a punishment: If one would do such a thing... one would be punished, etc. The laws of other nations are also impersonal, while those of Israel are instructions given by God who addresses himself to his people: "You shall not or you shall do this and that... For Israel, what is important is not the prohibition, but the guaranty to give to the relationship with God who is the liberator of his people. It is like when two people get married; they set for themselves a couple of rules in order to facilitate their commune life. Without that, the life of togetherness becomes impossible.

That is why the application of the law requires the free response of the people in term of fidelity and faithfulness. In that sense, the Ten Commandments are not a constraint with regard to human freedom. They are like road signs that show people the right direction to follow in order to come without difficulty where they are going. In that perspective, whoever follows the way proposed by God will be freed from his passions and selfishness, he will truly become a free person who can easily come to eternal salvation.

However, we should not forget that the summary of all the commandments is the law of love. Love is more demanding than any other law. For instance, none of the Ten Commandments forces me to love my enemies, to forgive unconditionally, to share my goods generously with the poor, to lay down my life for my brothers and sisters. The law of love does bind me to constant attention to discover what I can do for my brothers and sisters in order make them happy. As St Paul says, "Only love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13, 10).

Because the Ten Commandments were the guaranty of the relationship between God and his people, it was especially in the temple that relationship was lived and made visible. In that context, the temple played an important role in the life of the people of Israel, as a place of an encounter with God. It was there that the Ark of Covenant was

carefully kept. For that reason, the temple was considered not only as a dwelling place of God in the middle of his people, but also as a sacred place par excellence, where God's people gathered to worship him.

In order to worship correctly, the book of Leviticus provided with many stipulations to be respected. It required the sacrifices to offer, which justified the presence of merchants of oxen, sheep, doves as well as the moneychangers. Those activities in the temple were legal. But, imagine a little bit a crowded and a commercial traffic like what we have in flea market during Christmas Season. How could the atmosphere in the temple be? Though some would come to worship, others would be interested only in their commercial benefits. It is in that context we have to situate Jesus' reaction.

From Jesus' reaction, let us learn something. First, by chasing the merchants from the temple, Jesus reminds us that our relationship with God is not a matter of trade. Where this is overlook, there is a danger of degrading religion by using it for economic interests. And this is a continual temptation before us. I myself have been very often embarrassed when after a service people ask me: "Father, how much shall I give you?"

Second, by purifying the temple of "traders", Jesus declares that the time of the Messiah has begun. He clearly and forcibly condemns every combination and confusion between religion and economic interests. This teaching will always apply to the Christian religion. The history of the church is full of sins of this type. Such a situation cannot be denied or justified. We cannot hear the word of Jesus without asking forgiveness for all that was in the past and the present time a misuse of religion.

Third, by his gesture, Jesus is inviting us to draw our attention to the internal aspect of our worship rather than to what is purely external and legalist. The true worship of God comes from a contrite and a sincere heart rather than a mere external fulfillment of duties as religious as they might be. Jesus is calling us to the truth of our religious commitments and the sincerity of our faith.

Finally, by willing to destroy the existing temple and to restore it anew, Jesus is displacing the heart of the worship. The new temple is not our churches made of stones. God does not need this type of dwelling, as he never needed the beautifully temple of Jerusalem.

We must ourselves become the temple of God. With Christ and in Christ we are the temple of the God. True faith consists in accepting to be turned, with Christ, into living stones of the new temple and in giving up our lives for our brothers and sisters. May this time of Lent help us to understand that the only sacrifice acceptable to God is the work of charity, the generous service to our neighbors, especially the poor, the sick, the hungry and the homeless! May God bless you!

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



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