

### **Third Sunday of Lent B2024**

When we started the Lenten Season two weeks ago, I told you that we were entering a period of a battle against the evil. Last Sunday, I explained that Lent is also a time of radical choice in favor of God, as we saw in the readiness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Today, I want to say that Lent is equally a time of true worship and true adoration of God.

To set the people of Israel right in their adoration and worship, God gave them the Law. By doing so, God wanted to consolidate his relationship with Israel. It is the same law that shapes us as God's people today.

From the outset, we have to acknowledge that the Commandments are not a constraint with regard to our freedom. They are like road signs that show people the right direction to follow in order to come, without difficulties, where they are going. Whoever follows God's commandments will be freed from passions and selfishness; he will not waste his life and that of his fellows; he will truly become a free and happy person.

All the Ten Commandments can be summarized in the Law of love. However, Love is more demanding than any other law. For instance, none of the commandments forces me to love my enemy, to forgive unconditionally, to share my goods generously with the needy, to lay down my life for others, etc. The law of love binds me to constant attention towards others about what I can do for them.

Like in the case of marriage, the law is given as the guaranty of our relationship with God. It sets obligations and duties toward God and our fellows. Not to respect the law is neglecting our relationship with God and letting our life become a chaos. The law has to be fulfilled in the spirit of God's Covenant and not according to human interests.

For the people of Israel, it was in the temple that that relationship with God was lived and made visible. In that context, the temple played an important role as a place of an encounter with God, his dwelling place and a sacred place par excellence. It was there that the Ark of Covenant was carefully kept.

To regulate the worship and the sacrifice in the temple, the book of Leviticus (Chap. 5-6) gave rules and stipulations to be observed. That explains the presence in the temple of oxen, sheep and doves to be used for the sacrifice as well as the attendance of merchants and moneychangers.

All that activity in the temple was legal. But, imagine a crowded and a commercial traffic like that we have in flea markets during Christmas Season. How could the atmosphere in the temple be? For sure, some would come to worship, but others would be interested only in their commercial benefits. It is in that context we have to situate our Lord's reaction.

Our Lord drove out moneychangers with their animals and overturned their tables. He saw in them worship without reverence and without respect of the sacred place, the dwelling place of God. A worship without reverence is a worship that is formalistic, which is done only to obey the law, but with the heart far from the God.

Our Lord acted as he did in order to teach us that any worship of God that is done only to obey the law without true conversion of heart is irrelevant. Any sacrifice we bring in the Church should be an expression of what lies within 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.

By driving out the merchants from the temple, our Lord 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 of all the times. The history of the church is full of sins of this type. We cannot hear the Gospel of Jesus without asking forgiveness for what was done in the past and even today as misuse of religion for personal, ideological or economic interests.

By driving out of the temple moneychangers and disrupting their activities, our Lord wanted to purify the temple so that it gains its original meaning as a house of prayer. The house of God, indeed, is above all a house of prayer and a dwelling place of God. It has to be treated with reverence and respect. This particular point challenges us about our attitude in the Church before, during and after the Holy Mass.

Let me finish with the claim of the destruction of the temple. Our Lord says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”. A house does not have only a physical meaning as a building; it can also have a symbolic or a spiritual meaning. Sometimes we say of someone who hardly opens up to others that he is locked in himself. In this case, a person can be like a house.

By willing to destroy the existing temple and to restore it anew, our Lord was displacing the heart of worship. The new temple is not our churches or chapels made of stones. We must ourselves become the temple of God. We have to accept to be turned into living stones of the new temple that our Lord wants to rebuild anew.

In this time of Lent, we are called to become ourselves the temples of God. We have to obey God’s commandments, but always for the glory of God and never for our own satisfaction or for the need of being seen. We are called to worship God in truth and in spirit. May God bless each one of us as we walk toward the celebration of our redemption!

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



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