

3rd Sunday in Lent + 4 March 2024 + Ex 20:1-17

The last few Sundays, we have been considering how the 1st readings at Mass reveal the succession of Covenants that God made with Israel, leading up to the new and eternal Covenant in Jesus Christ. In order to see how today's 1st reading, the giving of the 10 Commandments, fits within this framework, we have to back up a little. So let's dive in!

In Exodus 19, Moses and the Children of Israel have just arrived at Mt. Sinai, having escaped slavery in Egypt through the miracle of the parting of the waters at the Red Sea. Moses goes up the mountain, and God says to him: *This is what you will say to the house of Jacob; tell the Israelites: You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (3-6).* In other words, if Israel is to be God's *treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*, then they must live in such a way consistent with such an exalted people. And here, God shows them the way.

Now in the last two Covenants—those with Noah and Abraham—and their fulfillment in the Sacraments, we focused more on what God does for us: He washes away our sins in Baptism, and gives us Himself in the Holy Eucharist. But today, we are going to focus more on our obligations in the Covenant. Because while God really does all of the heavy lifting in His Covenants, that does not mean that we are mere spectators. Rather, God's gifts demand certain standards of conduct in order to be fully received and enjoyed. To ignore our obligations in the Covenant is to downplay how much God values us in the relationship.

So given that our Lenten Penance service is coming up on Monday/tomorrow, let's look at the 10 commandments from the lens of how they keep us in family relationship with God. The 1st commandment is the most important: *You shall not have other gods besides me.* This commandment forbids idolatry, and is therefore really a matter of worship. And so we ask ourselves: who or what do I worship above all else? Myself: my reputation, body, pleasure? My work, hobbies, sports, toys, house, farm, vacations, etc.? This one is hard, but God is to be even higher than our families. Because if I worship my spouse or my children, I will come to expect from them certain responses or behaviors that they can never live up to.

The 2nd commandment is related: *You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain.* This is not just "swearing" as we mean it in modern English, but also rendering as "empty". In other words, does my tongue, and in fact my whole life, reverence God—as signified by His name—as utterly holy? Or do I live as a so-called "practical atheist". That is, do I live my life, outside of 1 hour on Sunday, as if, practically speaking, God doesn't exist?

Which brings us to the 3rd commandment: *Remember to keep holy the sabbath day. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God.*

Now it's important to keep in mind the correct vision of the 3rd commandment, which in fact applies to all of the 10 commandments. And that is, keeping the Sabbath is above all God's gift to us: it is a way in which we are gifted to participate in God's *Sabbath rest*, in His re-creation of heaven and earth, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So practically speaking, it means we also have a grave obligation to attend Mass on Sunday unless we have a serious reason not to, such as illness, caring for others, or physical impossibility (such as a blizzard or you are no longer able to get around by yourself). We need to be honest about this: I should *want* to go to Sunday Mass, I should make every reasonable attempt to do so, but I also am not called to put my or someone else's life in grave danger to do so. Pastors have the authority to dispense from the Sunday obligation for a just reason. Sunday is also a day ideal for family, relaxation, and works of charity.

The 4th commandment: *honor your father and mother*. Just as God adopts us as His children through the Covenant of Baptism, so each of us is a child of a father and mother. Marriage and the family is not an invention of society, as many want us to think today. Rather, it is part of God's design for creation *from the beginning*. And so honoring our parents is part of respecting God and His creation. Which also illuminates the 5th commandment: *you shall not kill* (which is actually better translated from the Hebrew as "you shall not 'slay' or 'murder'"), because all human beings are made in God's *image and likeness*. And the 6th: *you shall not commit adultery*. Adultery is breaking the marriage covenant—which itself is way in which human beings—husband and wife—image the total, exclusive, fruitful love of God for us: love which is made permanent in His Covenant with us in Jesus Christ.

The 7th commandment: *You shall not steal*, because the *LORD'S is the earth and its fullness* (Ps 24:1). God has also called us to *be fertile and multiply; to fill the earth and subdue it* (Gen1:28), and so the Church recognizes the right to protect private property. The 8th commandment, *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*. If the Jesus is *the way, the truth, and the life*, then to falsify the truth is a direct offense against God Himself. No human society can exist without the truth. Interestingly, the Catechism does allow for discernment in particular situations of whether someone has the right to a particular truth.

Finally, the 9th and 10th commandments against *coveting*, or we might say "excessive, disordered desire". Already here the commandments are moving toward the heart: it is in the heart where we have covetous desires for other people and their property. But as we said before, if we are made in God's image and likeness, then the only proper response to other people is love. And if everything ultimately belongs to God and is a gift from God, then our only proper response to created things is gratitude for what He has given us.

In the end, keeping the 10 commandments is really a matter of faith. If I believe in God, the Father and Creator of all, I will seek to live in accordance with this belief: a way which is illuminated by the 10 commandments. The commandments are not arbitrary, cold rules.

They are rather the internal logic of our covenantal relationship with a living God, in Jesus Christ: the natural way of life for a *priestly people and holy nation*. And as we will see next week in the failure of the Israelites to keep their end of the Covenant, we also must admit that we too fail by breaking the commandments through sin. But thanks be to God that He has made a way for us to be reconciled in Christ—above all in the great Sacrament of Reconciliation—which we will reflect on more next Sunday, and hopefully receive frequently!