

Lent 3 Year B 2021

Two weeks ago, we heard the story of Noah, the Ark and the rainbow (Gen 9.8-17) which included a promise made by God - 'never, never again'. It was a covenant. Last week's OT reading was about the promise to Abram, who became Abraham, the promise that he would become 'the ancestor to a multitude of nations', and again a covenant (Gen 17.1-7). And today we have the reading which is generally known as the giving of the Ten Commandments.

The one thing all these three readings have in common is the idea of Covenant - a Covenant between God and God's people. We gain various insights into that Covenant - God takes the initiative, God makes various promises, God is committed to the Covenant, God often gives a sign of the covenant, in Noah's case it was the rainbow, in Abraham's it was a son - Isaac. The people whom God led out of Egypt, out of slavery, were in a covenant relationship with God. When God sent Moses back to Egypt (after their encounter at the burning bush) - back to Egypt where Moses is wanted for murder) he told Moses 'I am the Lord. I established my covenant with (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to give them the land of Canaan. I have remembered my covenant. I will take (the descendants of Abraham) as my people and I will be your God'. (Ex6.1-8) So these commandments (in some Jewish traditions called 'the ten words of love') are the rules for maintaining this covenant, this solemn agreement between God and his people - words

of encouragement spoken, and written in stone, (the sign of this covenant) as a framework which will allow the people to live together and to live with God, in peace and in love. The people are called to be faithful, but often fail to be faithful and God, time and time and time again, forgives them and renews the Covenant.

When the HS gathers us together here to break bread, to offer each other the sign of God's peace, and to proclaim the word of God ('word' with both a capital W and a lower case one), that Covenant is renewed - and the Covenant relationship between God and his people is the emphasis of our Lenten OT readings this year - and meditating on these readings, and in general on our Covenant relationship with God, should help us to understand more fully, more meaningfully, the paschal mystery which lies at the heart of our Christian faith, the heart which is the New and Eternal Covenant, first promised by the prophet Jeremiah (a reading which we will hear in two weeks' time), who writes 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah'. That promise is fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, the remembrance and celebration of which we are preparing for throughout Lent.

In today's reading, the context of the giving of the commandments is spelled out very clearly in the beginning. 'Then God spoke all these words - I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of

Egypt, out of the house of slavery'. This is what *God* has already done for his people, this is how his covenant relationship with the people is being worked out, and the giving of the law is also part of that working out, the tablets of stone are a sign - just as the rainbow was a sign - of *God's* fidelity to the covenant. The commandments are not simply rules to be obeyed on pain of punishment, they are words of love given to help his people during their perilous journey, both to the Promised Land and to a full and meaningful relationship with the *God* who loves them - and all are based on what he has already done. - I am the Lord your *God*, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery'.

So what do the Ten Commandments mean for us today, living in a very different age, a very different culture?

I would like to think that we see them not as instructions, not as rules to be obeyed, but as response, response to what *God* has already done in Jesus, the paschal Mystery of the new covenant.

The first three commandments refer to our relationship with *God* - you shall have no other *God*; you shall not bow down to an idol; you should not make wrongful use of the name of your *God*. Why would we want to do any of these things? Yet some people worship wealth, some status, some power or influence; they make idols of material goods - the 'must haves' of our society. If we do any of these things, we take our eye off the meaning of the journey of life.

The rest of the commandments refer to our relationships with each other. I don't need to reiterate them, you know them well enough. Sufficient to say being true to the commandments requires regard both to *God* and neighbour - and someone once asked our Lord 'Who is my neighbour?' - and we all know how he answered that question.

The problem for many of the contemporaries of Jesus was that the rules had become the most important thing; they were no longer words of love but lengthy writings of instructions about how to live, down to the smallest detail. The rules were no longer aids to worshipping *God* or caring for neighbour - they were the only things that mattered - obey the rules to the letter of the Law - forget the spirit of the Law - and you were in the right. No wonder Jesus fumed.

The portrait of Jesus in today's Gospel is a world away from the caricature of Jesus, the meek and mild figure whose harmlessness looks almost indistinguishable from meekness - someone who can be persuaded through prayer to fulfil our shopping list. And an equal caricature is to use this passage to make Jesus into a godfather of violence, a revolutionary willing to support annihilation for the sake of his cause - as we see some religious fanatics doing today in other parts of the world. He is certainly violent, but he did not use force on his own behalf, to gain power for himself. His kingdom could not be established by violence, only by love. The casualties of his aggression were displaced tradesmen, not dead people. John tells us that Jesus

had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover - the festival of liberation from Egypt and from slavery - and he finds a new kind of slavery, an oppression which perverts the worship of God - the people are forced to enter into a relationship with God through money - money buys you access - and as a result they find a God of oppression, not liberation. The house of the Father who loves and liberates his people has become a 'market place', which is exploiting and degrading them. The high priests who are behind this trade are getting richer, the traders who take Roman coins in exchange for Temple coins are getting richer - although they are simply trading intermediaries. No wonder he is furious. The doves are the sacrifice of the poor, and they are, to put it simply, being ripped off and exploited by the rich, in the name of God. We are back to worshipping idols - wealth, status, control. Next time you see a rainbow give thanks that even if we forget what it is all about, God doesn't. 'Never again'. 'I have remembered'.