

LIVING GRACIOUSLY WITH THE GOD OF ALL GRACE

Year B, Lent 3 — Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

In my early years in this parish, one of our Sunday School teachers made it clear to me at the beginning of each year that one of the conditions of her agreement to teach the senior class was that she be allowed to depart from the prescribed curriculum and spend twelve weeks with the children learning and discussing the Ten Commandments. For her, she told me, the Ten Commandments stood at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and were precisely the moral tools our children and youth would need to equip them for all the challenges of adult life. I was always somewhat taken aback by our annual conversation, because I wanted to challenge her opinion that when you boiled down the full proclamation of Holy Scripture, the Ten Commandments were what was left. At the same time, I realized that she was a willing and committed teacher, and for our young people to have a good understanding of the Ten Holy Laws was important. It also meant that we wouldn't have to devote quite as much time to them in our Confirmation classes.

Quite honestly, though, I was never completely comfortable with this teacher's bias for placing all our faith eggs in this one basket. I worried that her passion for the Ten Commandments might reduce our church's considerable efforts in Christian Education to a course in morals and ethics; that life in the Spirit would be missed out. In the end, I trusted in that same Spirit, working through others in our congregation, to fill in the blanks, so to speak; to "tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love," as Hymn 661 puts it.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when in studying our First Reading, the giving of God's Ten Words to the Hebrew people, I was struck by how nurturing and grace-filled the laws now are in my reading and understanding; how so much of the baggage of prohibition and guilt that they formerly carried for me has now fallen away. And I now question if my Christian bias has, over the years, interfered with my appreciation of Hebrew scripture. I expect I need to live with that question for a while.

In the meantime, I invite you to reflect with me on the day's readings = the reading from Exodus and Psalm 19, as a call to live graciously with the God of all grace.

The context of our First Reading is given at the beginning of Exodus, chapter 20. The people of Israel have, through God's intervention, been delivered from the oppression of slavery in Egypt. In a sense, all their suffering is behind them now and they have some time to pause and reflect, breathe, regroup, and give thanks for all the events in their liberation. Timing is everything, we know, and into this hiatus, this time-out they are enjoying, the people receive another gift from the One who delivered them, the gift of the law.

Certainly, in the hands of the storyteller, the message is fresh: God is revealed as the deliverer of Israel, God's primacy among other gods is declared, and God's inscrutability is protected through the injunction prohibiting people from fashioning any material representation of God, a graven image, in other words. The words of the text, "you shall not," in part because they are repeated over and over, cause us to hear God's Words as pure law. But they are much more: they distinguish the God of Israel from other deities of the time who are understood by their followers to react to worship and offerings. This Hebrew God, we learn, if the liberation of the people from slavery is any indication, becomes involved and is proactive when injustice prevails, involved by calling people, people like Moses and Aaron who, beyond their own imagining, were able to give leadership just when it was most needed. It appears, then, as if this God will enter into and change human history. And so, a new understanding is advanced in these first few verses of Exodus 20; the term "God" is redefined; and in so doing, human thought is reordered, if you will, to include a God whose goodness and whose power are no longer unknowable or open to speculation. The giving of the law is a defining moment for the Hebrew people: it is the birth of a corporate faith, but it is also the beginning of a new relationship that includes not only the ancestors, not only the leaders of the people past and present, but everyone – all who are embraced by the promises and love of the God who has brought them out of Egypt. Shortly, they will make covenant – this God and these people.

Before covenant, however, there is instruction; and this instruction speaks of reverence for God and for neighbour; respect for each person, regardless of gender or status; and the need to accept and keep boundaries. In our time, we tend to regard the Ten Commandments as a kind of template for civil law, but in the context of the history of the people of Israel and their identity as the children of God, the laws are

more accurately a way to respond to a merciful God; to acknowledge that the things that are important to God are also important to the people of God. The laws tell us that to love God, we must love one another, honour one another, and preserve the integrity of the community that will be known by God's name. Often people will forget who they are because they will forget whose they are. By keeping God's law, by loving their neighbour and by living with one another compassionately and justly, the circle is completed and God's power and presence in the world will be seen and made known.

Psalms 19, one of the most poetic songs in the psalter, is an outpouring of gratitude for our human blessedness as those who are surrounded not only by the beauty and majesty of creation, but also, quite clearly, those surrounded by God. Beyond words, God speaks to the creatures of the earth, the psalmist writes, in everything on earth and in the heavens, through the day and through the night, in the warmth and the daily course of the sun across the sky, from its rising to its setting. Would that we made such easy connections in our own time and place: one of the great heresies of our day is our failure to appreciate the miracle of the natural world; to connect God and the gift of all life, and respond accordingly in how we live on the earth.

Interestingly, abruptly, there is a shift of focus in the psalm: now, the poet-theologian considers the law, whose principles are perfect, right, and pure; whose gifts revive the soul, rejoice the heart, and endure forever. The law nurtures, guides, corrects, and orders one's life, the psalmist declares, prompting the prayer every believer can pray, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock, and my redeemer."

Especially during Lent, it is easy for us to read the Scriptures for their Christian content. Today, Saint Paul writes in our Second Reading of the foolishness of Christ's cross as the very wisdom of God. And in today's Gospel, we see Jesus turn the tables, literally, on the religious establishment in Jerusalem. In the Gospel of John, the so-called cleansing of the temple is used as a kind of manifesto, setting the tone for the proclamation of Jesus' teaching, preaching, suffering, death, and resurrection. And both readings relate to the events of Holy Week which casts its long shadow back over the whole season of Lent.

Neither reading relates easily, though, to the discipline of Lent – self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love. Reflecting on how we live as the people of God in Christ Jesus, however, is not a huge stretch when we consider the excellence of the community born through God's Ten Words of covenant. Yes, we need the gospel. Yes, we need the proclamation of Christ crucified. But perhaps we also need to come to ground occasionally by returning to our beginnings in faith as presented in today's First Reading. The giving of the law is so much more than a blueprint for social order. Exodus 20 is a faith document: it is proclamation; it is revelation; it is adoption; and it is the first covenant which, through our baptism into Christ, is also our covenant.

Hear, O Israel,
the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind,
and with all your strength.
This is the first and the great commandment.
The second is like it:
Love your neighbour as yourself.
There is no commandment greater than these.

I must tell you that I cannot preach a prophetic sermon on these texts today. You, in fact, have preached it to me through the most incredible outpouring of love and forgiveness, prayer and care, generosity and understanding I have ever known in my lifetime in the church. The illness that has taken me away from my pastoral duties over the past two months has only been bearable because of your graciousness and faithfulness. Most days I could not pray for myself, but I did not feel abandoned; rather, I was blessed by your prayer and good works – prayer and good works which took so many different forms. Lent began early for you, this year; and I can do nothing but thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you have done and continue to do to provide for my rehabilitation; for your gift of living graciously as the people of God in Christ Jesus with the God of all grace. Thank you for your sermon which has been

longer than even I have preached – two months and counting, by my reckoning. Thank you for your prayer. Thank you for your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.