



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Third Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2018

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Scriptures

So far, each of the first readings for Lent have described covenant promises God made with his people. He made a covenant with Noah promising never again to destroy the earth. After the testing of Abraham's faith, God renewed his promise to make him the father of a great nation. In today's first reading, we hear Moses' present the Ten Commandments to the descendants of Abraham after God established a covenant with them through Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments weren't just a set of rules governing conduct. They were meant to set the Israelites apart from others and instruct them on how to live in a covenantal relationship with God. The first commandments governed the Israelites' conduct toward God. The remaining ones addressed how the Israelites should behave toward others. The commandments were not intended as restrictions on the Israelites' freedom, but were meant to help them avoid the destructiveness of sin and to live in peace with God and each other. Today's Responsorial Psalm praises God's Law. The Psalmist sings of it as a gift through which people could find wisdom, enlightenment, guidance, truth, and a reason for rejoicing.

John's version of the story of Jesus and the moneychangers in the Temple was chosen for this Sunday because only in St. John's Gospel does Jesus allude to his resurrection after this episode. Jesus' behavior in the Jerusalem temple would have been shocking in its time and not just for the drama of one suddenly driving out the animal sellers and currency changers. To the Jews of his day, Jesus' behavior would have reminded them of prophecies that the Messiah would come and cleanse the temple. But this was not enough for them to believe. The Jews demanded a further sign that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead, Jesus issued a challenge they could not understand. They heard him invite them to destroy the temple building, which he would then rebuild in three days. But John used words with a deeper meaning: Jesus invited his challengers to destroy the temple of his body, and he would raise it up in three days. After his death and resurrection, the disciples recognized this strange "challenge" as a prophecy of his resurrection.

When St Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he admitted that faith in a crucified Messiah seemed to make no sense and therefore was a stumbling block to faith for many. Yet, this was the wisdom and plan of God. Every covenant God had made with his people had been broken by them. Each of these covenants were elements in God's plan of salvation, but none was sufficient for salvation. Each covenant prepared the way for God's final covenant in Jesus. Through his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus made salvation possible. Through his salvation, Jesus offers an eternal covenant with God that does not depend on our striving or compliance, only our faith. This is the mystery we struggle to grasp as we make our Lenten journey toward Easter.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Exodus 20:1-17

Keep my commandments.

- In every covenant, there are laws, duties, and responsibilities that must be followed.
- The Ten Commandments express the central law of the covenant made on Mt. Sinai.
- They outline the characteristic relationships with God and with neighbor.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 19: 8, 9, 10, 11 Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.

Reading II: 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Christ is the power of God.

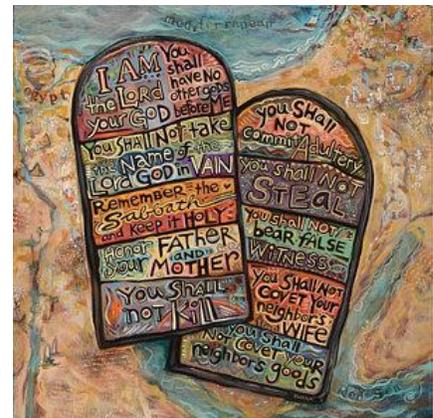
- Signs are an important part of Israel's theology, as Paul notes in today's passage.
- In Israel's life, signs always convey the message of the presence and power of God.
- For those who can see, Christ is the ultimate sign of the presence and power of God.

Gospel: John 2:13-25

In three days, I will raise it up.

- For Israel the temple is a sign of the presence of God.
- Jesus cleanses the sign because it is no longer conveying the message.
- Another message is added, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus transfers the sign of God's presence from the temple to his own body, raised from death.

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Artwork by Jen Norton

The Demands of Integrity

In the lore of the Sisters of St. Joseph, there is a story of how Mother Cecelia Bowen of Springfield, Massachusetts, taught her sisters what integrity demanded of anyone who wished to dress as a woman religious. In the 1880s, on the very day that a group of novices were given the habit, she marched all of them out to spend their first afternoon as nuns with the people in the almshouse. She even had one of them empty her trunk so it could carry what the group was bringing to the people and the things necessary to celebrate the Eucharist with the poor. Those young women, newly dressed as nuns, would never forget that their habit was a sign of their commitment to Christ's poor.

Mother Cecelia would have well understood why Jesus did what he did in the Temple. On the day Jesus made his first public appearance in Jerusalem, he took on the temple establishment for perverting the core symbol of God's presence among the people by making what was intended to be a place of communion into a business venture. But Jesus' "cleansing of the temple" was more than just a violent reaction against attempts to sell grace. It was actually his first proclamation about who he was and what his mission would entail.

John loves to hide hints to deeper meaning in his Gospel, thus enticing his readers to go back and find more each time they encounter it. In this story, Jesus arrives at the temple area and calls it his Father's house; with that he is claiming to be God's Son as described in Psalm 2. As he lashes out against the temple merchants and bankers, the disciples perceive that Jesus is like Jeremiah whose passion for God's work will bring him persecution.

Finally, Jesus engages in his first cryptic conversation with the leaders of his people. Upset that he has disrupted the business of religion, they demand that he authenticate himself by some sign that proves he is of God. Taking their words far deeper than they intended, he said, "Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up." They completely missed his implication. As if they didn't understand the difference between the holy of holies and the entire temple complex, they responded that the work of construction had gone on for more than two generations, "and you will raise it up in three days?" They were concentrating on protecting a building and its enterprise; Jesus was passionate about God's presence in their midst. As they accused him of disrespecting the Temple, he was reacting to their perversion of what the Temple was and what it symbolized. He insisted that in spite of their

profanation, nothing could overcome God's will to dwell amid humankind.

Beginning with the reading from Exodus presenting the commandments which set the boundaries on how the people of God live in communion with God and one another, today's Scriptures are a call to authenticity in our life and worship. Paul tells us not to look for great signs or sophisticated theories but to concentrate on God's unexpected and countercultural message of love via the cross. Crowning it all, John's Gospel depicts Jesus making a living theater of God's rejection of religious practice that is anything less than an expression of love.

Jesus did what he did in the Temple because he believed he was the Son of a loving God who wanted nothing more nor less than the whole heart of the chosen people. When he walked into that Temple, his faithfulness demanded that he act out God's judgment on what was happening there — no matter the cost to himself.

The disciples spoke of his zeal, which is a word that could also describe passionate integrity. As we contemplate this Gospel and the readings that fill out its message, we are asked where we stand in the scene John presents. Do we take the side of those who defend business as usual, ignoring how often the busyness of our pursuits and our concerns for externals blind or protect us from a vibrant and even surprising relationship with God? Do we stand on the sidelines with the disciples who see prophetic actions and remain as cheering spectators who applaud and say, "Wow! That looks like somebody who really believes in God!" Or are we willing to follow God's Son and try to live with the sort of integrity that will keep us on the margins of respectable society and close to the heart of God?

Mother Cecelia Bowen didn't chase anyone out of a temple, but she did lead her sisters away from status symbols into the company of the poor. What actions of integrity would she and Jesus expect of us who sign ourselves daily with the cross of Christ?

Mary McGlone, CSJ

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