

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT 2021

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GOD'S COMMANDMENTS AND THE TEMPLES OF OUR HEARTS

The Ten commandments in our first reading today in Exodus 20:1-17, are also found in Deuteronomy 5:4-21. They are called in Hebrew the '*Aseret Hadebarim* (Exodus 34:28/Deut 10:4), meaning "The Ten Words", and in Greek, the *deka logous*, where we get the English, *Decalogue*, that is the "Ten Discourses or Words." They are also referred to as "the Testimony" (Exodus 25:16) or "the Words of the Covenant" (Exodus 34:28).

Most Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes like the Sumerian *Lipit Ishtar* or Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi* were primarily written in conditional statements "if you do this and that, then I will do this or that." The Decalogue, however, was uniquely stated and constructed in the form of absolutes, "You shall or shall not do this." These statements directed in the second person singular forms "you" were referred to Israel as a body and to the individual person as one. Moses had just led them from slavery in Egypt, where they were already losing their identity, So God made them His people, building a personal relationship with them. He, therefore, spoke these ten words to rouse up their internal motivation rather than the external pressure or coercion that comes from conditions. He gives them a new identity and way of life.

The Decalogue was easily summarized into two by Jesus in Matthew 22:34-40. This reveals the concern of the commandments about our relationship with God and with one another. The first three words deal with our relationship with God, and for this, Jesus cites the summary in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, also called the *Shema Yisra'el*, that is, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." The remaining seven deal with our relationship with one another. Jesus cites the summary in Leviticus 19:18, which says, "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." So, life's vertical and horizontal relationships are included here in the Decalogue, showing that we cannot ignore either of these relationships (with God and humans). They help us to become true children of God.

The Israelites celebrated the Passover feast to mark their deliverance and exodus from slavery in Egypt and their formation as God's people. Therefore, the Jews all over the world gathered to obey God's command to worship and make sacrifices at the temple. The religious ceremony and celebration of their identity as God's people soon became an opportunity for extortion by the temple leaders. They were supposed to help people communicate with God. At the time of Jesus, the temple's outer courts meant for worship had been turned into a commercial ground for trading the items for sacrifices.

Today's Gospel reading from John 2:13-15 describes Jesus' fiery action against those selling oxen, sheep and pigeons and the money changers in the temple. Making a whip, Jesus drove them from the temple - the House of God, which they had turned into a marketplace, and a den of robbers. The disregard for the House of God that served as an identity marker for the Israelites was subtly destroying the spiritual relationship between God and His people, and Jesus would not allow that to continue.

The vertical relationship that ought to exist between God and his people, highlighted in the first three commandments of the Decalogue, and summarized by Jesus in the Love of God above all things, was substituted with the love of money and material wealth in the very place where God was to be worshipped. The horizontal relationship that was to exist between people, as expressed in the remaining seven commandments of the Decalogue, was also destroyed by the traders of these sacred items who cheated the

innocent pilgrims who came to worship God and to offer their sacrifices to Him. Jesus, noticing this sacrilegious destruction of the House of God - the identity marker for the Jews, wasted no time to correct the temple officials' ills. His disciples saw the fulfilment of Psalm 69:9 in Him, "it is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

When the Jews challenged Jesus to show a sign for doing what he did, he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up." They would have wondered how one man could rebuild the reconstructed temple that took them forty-six years. Although the temple would later be destroyed, he was talking about the temple of his body. He told the woman at the well in John 4:24 that "true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth." The physical temple building would no longer serve as an identity marker for the people; rather, God's dwelling place will be in their hearts. St. Paul explains this well in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are."

In the second reading from 1 Corinthians 1:22-25, Paul reveals that our identity marker as Christians and modern-day Israelites is not in the physical temple building, but in Christ Jesus, the power of God and the Wisdom of God, a message that serves as a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. Therefore, we are invited to reflect on our new Identity in Christ Jesus and on the ten words of the Decalogue to see them not as a set of restricting instructions but as liberating guidelines for us to achieve our true and full potentials and identity as children of God. When we keep these words, we are at peace with God and fellow human beings, making our hearts the actual dwelling place and worthy temples where God can dwell.