

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR B  
March 11, 2012

Exodus 20  
Palms 19  
1 Corinthians 1:22-25  
John 2:13-25

An interesting thing happened on the way to this homily. Whether by design of the liturgists or a gracious coincidence, the scripture reading for yesterday's morning office was the same as the first reading for this third Sunday of Lent in year B. If you were listening, you heard it from the Book of Exodus – the version of the Ten Commandments with emphasis on the first four. At the morning offices there is also second reading with some connection to the first reading from scripture. So yesterday we heard from a homily by St. Augustine, whose metaphors and challenges to his hearers give me a starter. We will see where it takes us.

I never thought of the Ten Commandments as a ten-stringed harp, but that is the way St. Augustine plays with them in his sermon. He starts from a saying of Jesus about reconciling with your adversary on the way to the court for a hearing before a judge. It is always better to settle out of court than take a chance with a judge or jury. Augustine then asks the question: Who is this adversary? It is not the Devil, for God would never want you to reconcile with him. Who is your adversary? Augustine proposes that it is the very Word of God, God's Law. I would have expected him to say rather the Lawgiver. God is my adversary and my accuser when I am in the wrong regarding observing his commandments.

Whoever prayed and wrote millennia ago Psalm 19, our responsory this morning, did not see the Law itself as adversarial but very good, for as the Psalm reads, "The Law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul, trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eye."

Those praises of the benefits of the Law may apply to the virtuous, the saints, but they express ordinary person's experience of the Law. St. Paul as a zealous Pharisee tried to live the letter of the whole Law but failed. He describes his experience as one common to most of us in his letter to the Romans: "I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate."<sup>1</sup> He goes on, "the desire to do the right [obey the commandments] is there but not the power."<sup>2</sup> . . . My inner self agrees with the Law of God, but I see in my body's members another law at war with the law of my mind."<sup>3</sup>

Jewish law, especially remembrance of the deliverance from Egypt at the Passover required the sacrifice of a lamb for every family. Other religious rites required birds and fruits of the earth to be offered in sacrifice. People came from all over on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There was a need to exchange money and for the purchases of what they could not bring. Buying and selling around about the temple was a necessary business. There is a proverb that goes something like this, 'sin easily wedges its way in the crack between buying and selling.'

Jesus' heated words and angry actions reveal his righteous indignation at finding these businesses related to animal sacrifice and temple tax encroaching on areas designated for prayer around the Holy of Holies. When he was asked to give a sign to show by what authority he did such things, he gave an enigmatic response: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Preposterous. But he was talking about his passion, death, and

resurrection; something that would be realized by his disciples only after these things happened.

The Jews demanded signs to convince them Jesus' actions were of God. Paul says the Greeks sought for wisdom in their curiosity for all the latest theories. Two thousand years later are people still looking for signs or for a new-age wisdom that would help them cope with the experience of the struggle between good and evil in the world, within themselves? If we are supposed to settle with God before we appear before the judgment seat, what resources do we have that would satisfy God's rights to the obedience that we have not given?

I hope that with Paul we can agree that God has given us the greatest sign of the desire on his part to be reconciled with us. *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.*"<sup>4</sup> Do we really need another sign? While we have nothing to offer from our defendant side of the case to complete the contract for peace, God has provided it for us in his Son's perfect obedience, even to death on the cross. That self-emptying and humiliation of the Son satisfies the demands of justice required for the sins of all humanity from Adam to the last person.

This does not mean that we are excused from obeying the commandments. Rather, we should see them in a new light, not as burdensome obligations, but as opportunities to respond to God's love by loving obedience in return. Paul urges us to bring everything, all our appetites, all our desires, into obedience and under the headship of Christ Jesus. For He is our reconciliation and our peace.

In this holy, joyful season of repentance, of turning to God for forgiveness, a time for growth in self-understanding and in knowledge of God, may we begin to live, as Paul says, by the Law of the Spirit, no longer by the law of the flesh. If we are to be temples worthy of the indwelling Holy Spirit, then now is a favorable time for a bit of clearing out of the extraneous business that keeps us from appreciating and observing the sure guidelines for a good, holy life, given to us in the commandments, the precepts of the church, and its moral teachings.

May we all be reconciled to God this Lent and look forward to the Easter triumph of Jesus' resurrection with the hope of bringing us closer to that day when we want to hear the judgment of our whole life in the words: "Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."

<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:15

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22, 23

<sup>4</sup> John 3:16