

the Sunday Readings



Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers & over-turned their tables.

(John 4 : 15)

3rd SUNDAY IN LENT (b)

3rd SUNDAY IN LENT (b)

*true worship*¹

introduction

Adults preparing to be baptised at Easter undergo a first scrutiny today. The scrutiny is a communal check of the baptismal candidates' zeal for a new life; worshipping God in 'the spirit' and 'the truth' of 'the Living Torah' (Jesus). The readings boost our determination to remove any lingering faithlessness that will frustrate the working of God's love in our lives. Believing in God means we put our trust in the holy ONE. The worship of money is contrary to faith in God, who demands genuine worship. John presents the first confrontation between Jesus and the Israelite religious authorities. The confrontation occurs in the Temple at Jerusalem at Passover. Jesus discovers oppressive practices, which pervert worship due to, 'our jealous God'.²

first reading: Exodus 20: 1 – 17³

[the ten commandments]

Then God spoke all these words:(1) I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;(2) you shall have no other gods before me.(3) You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the Earth beneath, or that is in the water under the Earth.(4) You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,(5) but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.(6) You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. (7) Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.(8) Six days you shall labour and do all your work.(9) But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.(10) For in six days the Lord made heaven and Earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.(11) Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.(12) You shall not murder.(13) You shall not commit adultery.(14) You shall not steal.(15) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.(16) You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not

1 Cover Image: Christ driving the money changers from the temple; Michael Smither; (1972) Victoria University Art Collection.

2 [Ex.20:5] "Our jealous God" - Demanding exclusive allegiance, such as there must be between wife and husband.

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.(17)

'The ten words' (declogue) of the Torah (Law) teach about God's freedom – the awesomeness of the time (vv.8-11) and the awesomeness of language (v.7). These are the modes of life which must be defended, otherwise the value of life is profaned and degraded. In Torah-keeping, the exclusive claims of God's holiness, are linked to the value of sisters and brothers. God's claim on the people's loyalty is the critical principle which permits us to turn away from our own good and interest, towards the interests of our neighbour. The statement of Torah clarifies that there is one dominant command from which everything else flows (v.3).⁴ The expression of this dominant command is more a victory cry that there will be no other gods, because the Lord God has come and defeated them all. The exclusive claim the Lord has over all our lives, leads to the holiness of God, and redefines our human lives and our human purpose.

response: Psalm 19 : 8 – 11

[God's glory in the Law]

*The precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;(8)
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.(9)
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.(10)
Moreover by them is Your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.(11)*

The cumulative effect of these statements about, *the Torah of God*, is that of all the Lord's good gifts at Creation (cf. vv.1-6), none is more precious than the gift of *the Torah*. The speaker discerns that in the matter of *the Lord's shalom*, there is a delicate balance of this gift of creation. It is neither negotiable nor at human disposal. The principles of justice and righteousness in the Torah, cannot be compromised. The power of a ruler: sometimes presented as a grant of the people; sometimes as a grant of the Lord, can be held arrogantly, or it can be exercised for the benefit of the people. We struggle to keep such affirmations in balance.⁵ 'Covenant' has been a much used word but we have only begun to think carefully about what it means to perceive reality as 'covenantal'. Covenant

4 Traditionally among Catholics, Ex.20:1-6 is considered as only one commandment and Ex.20:17 as two. Cf Dt.5:6-21.

5 [v.8] 'The precepts / commandments' (of the Covenant)

includes the conscious affirmation of the hurts, needs, resources and energies among partners who take each other seriously. It depends upon the resolve of the established power to make covenantal choices (choices for the benefit of the other party) in the midst of enormous pressures of human need and self-interest.

Covenant requires an agent of order and for the psalmist, that agent of order is usually the ruler (though it may be the government, or the doctor, or teacher, or the parent). The ruler is the agent of legitimate authority and his function (and it usually is a man) as ruler is clear; to arrange and administer power in the face of chaos, so that people can be human after the image of God. That means managing the food supply so people can eat; managing demons so that people are free; managing sicknesses so that people are healthy and to address death in life-giving ways.⁶

In Israelite categories, in the honouring of Torah and enhancing creation, it is *'the agent of vision'* who sees things the ruler does not see. The agent of vision has the delicate task of holding together God's will for us. This matter concerns our obedience to God's will for creation. We have no control over this. A ruler always thinks about order. But the prophet thinks about the Torah, which a ruler thinks does not matter. Torah is especially about, *"giving power to the powerless; reviving the soul; making the simple wise; rejoicing the heart and enlightening the eyes"* (vv.7-8). *Torah* is the concept that *creation is Yhwh's* and not ours. That is, creation is not at our disposal. That places demands on us, whatever power we possess. We are not free to do what we will with our power however we are placed. This is what the agent of vision always says to agents of order. We are not free to do what we want because real responsibility is placed on the shoulders of those who possess power, goods and access.⁷

second reading: 1 Corinthians 1 : 22 – 25

[Christ is the power and wisdom of God]

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,(22) but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,(23) but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.(24) For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.(25)

We modern Christians usually raise such questions in relation to our struggle to find meaning in the routines of daily living, or in our efforts to discern God's

6 Such a way of putting the function of the agent of order, gives us a fresh glimpse of Jesus. He did feed the people and he dealt with demons, healed and overcame death. He is then, the real ruler and the model for how rulers and people with power are to conduct themselves. They exist – for the community. The ruler exists for the people. But if the king wants to transcend history – something Jesus refused to do (see *Lk.4:1-13*) and was crucified, then his conception of order is subject to no other; may be questioned by no other; is accountable to no other – and must be defended at all costs.

7 In the Psalm the heavenly elements of the world, speak of the power and wisdom of their Creator (vv.2-7). The Creator's wisdom is available to human beings in the law (vv.8-11), toward which the psalmist prays to be open (vv.12-14).

presence (or absence) in the chaos of our family life, or in the even more ambiguous confusion of world events. Such attitudes reflect our human claim to set standards by which God's action is to be evaluated. Paul confronts this human demand, with the truth of the cross as God's saving power (v.23). Paul implies that God's activity never confronts us human beings with the type of persuasive force that we demand. Paul argues, that the Corinthians who regard these human demands as so important, could hardly expect to be among the elect. The church in Corinth comprised a group of people whose talents, ambition, and wealth, led them to achieve a higher status than their origins and social class would normally allow.

Turmoil in the community was caused by some who tried to wield their new-found power and influence within the Christian community. It was something they couldn't exercise within the larger community of Corinth. Paul refuses to allow the message of the cross to be confused with a religion that promises the faithful miraculous powers, or wisdom which would pass as profound in some human sense. With his message of the cross, he invites his listeners/readers to discover an expression of power that differs from the common understanding of power as domination, coercion and control. These qualities thrive in an environment of rivalry and competition. On the other hand, God's action in Jesus provides a new definition of power - in vulnerability (v.18). That discovery puts in perspective the rivalry of the competing factions like those in Corinth. Power belongs to the whole community - and especially to those, who were previously excluded from it.

gospel reading: John 2 : 13 – 25⁸

[Jesus cleanses the temple]

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.(13) In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.(14) Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. (15) He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"(16) His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."(17) The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"(18) Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (19) The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"(20) But he was speaking of the temple of his body.(21) After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.(22) When he

8 *Jn.2:13-25* The passage indicates the post-resurrectional replacing of the temple by the person of Jesus. The other gospels place the cleansing of the temple in the last days of Jesus' life (*Matthew* - on the day Jesus entered Jerusalem; *Mark* - on the next day). The order of events in the gospel narratives is often determined by theological motives rather than by chronology.

was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.(23) But Jesus on his part, would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people(24) and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.(25)

John had just presented the start of Jesus' mission in Cana of Galilee. Then the first confrontation with the authorities of the Israelite religious authorities takes place in the Jerusalem temple. (The synoptics put this event towards the end of Jesus' ministry). Passover is the celebration of liberation.⁹ What Jesus finds in the temple is a new form of oppression of people. It seems that concessions to trade in the temple were in the hands of a few powerful people, including the family of the high priest. Jesus' action wasn't so much against the merchants themselves. They were merely employees. He acted against the highest authorities who were responsible for the organisation of the trading. He accuses them of converting to the temple into a commercial centre.¹⁰

In *the Book of Revelation*, John says that in the new Jerusalem, there will be no temple.¹¹ He goes on to say that the temple will be the whole universe. He means that there is not to be any exploitation: neither in church porches, nor in the streets and centres of commerce. In other words, there must be no exploitation at all.¹² John, the gospel writer, was anti-temple. Other groups in Israel, like the Essenes and the Samaritans, felt the same way about the temple. John mentions that Jesus was later accused of being a Samaritan.¹³ When Jesus was put on trial, sayings of his are used against him. For example, "*He said he would destroy the temple*". . . but here Jesus says, "*You destroy . . .*" which puts the burden of the destruction of the temple on the Israelite religious authorities. The religious authorities couldn't accuse Jesus of purifying the temple of corruption and exploitation, because his message was too consistent with the message of the prophets. So instead, they accuse him of trying to destroy the temple. They gave great importance to the temple. But the temple authorities' attitudes were ruining people.

9 [v.13] *'Passover'*: This is the first Passover mentioned in John; a second is mentioned in *Jn.6:4*; a third in *Jn.13:1*. Taken literally, they point to a ministry of at least two years.

10 Money-changers were necessary. The temple offerings had to be made with a special currency - an ancient temple coin because Roman coinage wasn't acceptable. The sale of the animals was for the sacrifices. Doves were the commonest sacrifice. That was the sacrifice of poor people. Mary, as a poor person, offered one of those doves when Jesus was born. This commerce served a liturgical purpose. But it seems that Jesus didn't care so much about the worship itself. What He did care about, was stopping the trading.

11 Cf. *Rv.2:17-22*

12 The temple would have been crowded with an influx of pilgrims at Passover time. Jesus' protest action would have hardly brought the whole complex business to a stand-still. His action; small-scale and token; was a prophetic gesture.

13 cf. *Jn.8:48*

Jesus was opposed to the idea of giving more importance to houses than to peoples' bodies. He too was against the temple but his accusers were wrong in saying that he was going to destroy it like a terrorist. Jesus put an end to the temple without any need to set it on fire. All the accusations made by exploiters in any society against Christ are similar to the accusations here; that Jesus wanted to destroy the religious temple. But Jesus intends '*temple*' to mean, not only the religious sanctuary but also the temples of banking and power and commerce. In Jerusalem, there was a willingness to see the signs that Jesus gave and to be convinced by them,¹⁴ but all that is understood through the signs that he gave, is that he is some kind of wonder-worker!

for sharing:¹⁵

- *The ten words provide the pattern for the community that is to live under God. Comment on Exodus 20 : 1 – 17*
- *For St Paul, God's new WORD to humanity is the message of salvation in the cross. But that WORD is even less suited to human demands of power and wisdom than the words of the decalogue. Comment on 1 Corinthians 1 : 22 – 25*
- *Jesus replaces the old covenant and its institutions of Torah (Law) and the Temple, with a person – himself! Consider our religious practices. Do they show 'zeal for God's house?' Comment on John 2 : 13 - 25*

prayer:¹⁶

*Holy God, the folly of the cross
mocks our human wisdom,
and the weakness of the crucified
puts worldly power to shame.
Banish from our hearts*

14 *Jn.2:23-25*

15 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'

16 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*every pretence of might and of knowledge,
that by the power flowing from Christ's resurrection
Your people may be raised up from the death of sin
and fashioned into a living temple of Your glory.
Grant this through Christ, our liberator from sin. Amen.*

review:¹⁷

*The cleansing of the Temple brings to mind the words in the Rite of Reconciliation which says that in this Sacrament, the Holy Spirit again sanctifies the Temple. We might ask ourselves to what extent do we understand our own bodies as the temples of God's Holy Spirit, or to what extent do we see Christian virtue as being the embodying of God's Spirit? We can be so utilitarian in regard to life, that nothing of the spark of the Spirit is experienced. By and large we Catholics look on failings in regard to sexuality as real sins, but we recognise few other things immediately as sin. The gospel hints that our bodies must be seen not just as the focus of sin, but as temples of God's Holy Spirit and that we are to embody the Spirit, through our sense of touch; our sense of being lovingly present to others; of healing and tending others – that's all part of our bodiliness. If we fail to see that this bodiliness and these actions are connected to the Holy Spirit, then sin is part of our mentality – **Eugene O'Sullivan O.P. Celebrating Reconciliation (1982)***

-----0000000-----

¹⁷ The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.