

Homily March 4, 2018

As a child I loved hearing and telling jokes or riddles. They were clean, simple and often a bit corny. I was reminded of one as I reflected on our first reading. "Who was the first to break the ten commandments?" Of course, it was Moses, as described in the Bible. We are told that in coming down from the mountain with the stone tablets on which God had written the commandments, he became angry at seeing the people worshipping the golden calf so he threw the stone tablets which fell to the ground and broke into pieces.

The ten commandments presented in our first reading today are only a portion of the volume of law revealed in the Old Testament of the Bible. Nevertheless, the ten commandments have become a staple in learning about God's law. Going back to the 4th century they were a teaching tool as part of pre-baptismal catechesis. We memorized them as children. They serve as the outline of presenting the moral teaching of the Church in the catechism. They can serve us well as the starting point of our own examination and reflection on how well we are responding to the call to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.

In our responsorial psalm we affirmed in verse after verse how good and valuable the law of the Lord. It is a gift to guide us, in the words of our refrain, unto everlasting life. Yet when we look closely and honestly at the commandments and our own lives we will notice that we fall short. We may ignore one or two or at least re-interpret them for our own benefit. But if our Christian conscience is well informed we will know when we have failed. That is why as we began the Mass we prayed that "we who are bowed down by our conscience (that interior voice, knowing the words of the commandments, that tells us when we have sinned) may always be lifted up by your mercy. For the people to whom these commandments were first revealed they were at the heart of their covenant relationship with God. Obedience to the commandments signified truly belonging to the one God.

In his Gospel St. John placed the incident described in today's Gospel selection as early on in Jesus' public ministry. Jesus made a bold and authoritative intrusion into the lives of the people He came to redeem. He upbraided them for their irreverence in the use of the temple, that most important place of their interaction with the God of their covenant. And this became the occasion of Jesus first, albeit veiled, announcement of His future death and resurrection. He spoke of the destruction and restoration of the temple, but it was the temple of His Body. It was His Body that would be destroyed in death on the cross and rebuilt in the resurrection on the third day.

Jesus death and resurrection initiated a new covenant to replace the one that was based on simple obedience to the law.

The new covenant is based on personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the new temple. And our worship is attached to, celebrated in conjunction with, the presence of Jesus Christ Himself. It is the presence that is uniquely manifest when we gather to celebrate the Mass and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is made present and He comes among us not only in Spirit, but in sacrament. He comes in a way that gathered as the Body of Christ, we incarnate that new temple. And receiving Jesus in word and sacrament, the life of grace, the life of the Holy Spirit is enriched within our individual temples of the Holy Spirit, our very person, body and soul.

While the commandments are not the heart of the new covenant, they remain as critical tools in our relationship with Jesus Christ who is the heart of the new covenant. Our obedience to these commandments reiterated by Jesus Christ in His teaching is a sign of our faith and trust in Him. It is a sign of our gratitude for His mercy. It is a sign of our commitment to bring the world under the dominion of Jesus Christ and fidelity to the commandments.

Each act of obedience to a commandment, abetted by grace, trains us to realize the power and freedom we have to choose and do good. Each act of obedience moves our heart to a greater disposition to follow Jesus completely in everything we do.

A humble and thoughtful review of the commandments ought to be an important part of our Lenten reflection. There are many published examinations of conscience that help us expand on the broad subject matter and many particular actions addressed in each commandment. With this prayerful knowledge we can better prepare for Easter with a sacramental experience of confession and reconciliation. Newly reconciled we can all the more appreciate the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for ourselves and the entire Church and even the entire world.