

### **THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT 2006/B**

Lent is a time of battle, a time of choice, but it is also a time of true worship and true adoration of God. All the readings of this day are an invitation to discover the true cult which is pleasing to God. The 1<sup>st</sup> reading reminds us God's law given to Israel and, through Israel, to us. The law or the commandments have two components whose first deals with God and the second with human beings. These two elements make up a unity; they cannot be separated. One cannot say that he is interested only in God and has nothing to do with his fellow humans and vice versa. Both humanitarians who care only for humans as well as the spiritualists who are concerned only with God are misleading. We can only do both at the same time.

What is the true essence of the law? In fact, Israel was not the only people on earth which had good and just laws, promulgated in the name of God. The history of humanity shows several collections of laws published by the sovereigns of ancient time. What makes the difference between them is, first of all, the way these laws are formulated. The laws of other nations always begin by setting conditions to which is related a punishment: If one will do such a thing... one will be punished, etc. While these laws are impersonal, those of Israel are instructions given by God who addresses himself to his people: "You will not or will do this and that... What imports most is not the prohibition, but the guaranty to give to the relationship with God who is the liberator of his people. It is like when two people get married; they set for themselves a couple of rules in order to facilitate their commune life. Without that, the life of togetherness becomes impossible. That is why the application of the law requires the free response of the people in term of fidelity and faithfulness.

Second, the Ten Commandments are not a constraint with regard to human freedom. They are like road signs that show to people the right way and the direction to follow in order to come without difficult where they are going. In this perspective, whoever who follows the way proposed by God will be freed from his passions and selfishness, will not waste his life and the life of others, and will truly become a free and happy person. However, we should not forget that the law of love is the summary of all the commandments. Love is more demanding than any other law. For instance, none of the ten commandments forces me to love my enemy, forgive unconditionally, share my goods generously with the poor, lay down my life for my brother and sister. The law of love binds me to constant attention to discover what I can do for my brother and sister to make them happy. As St Paul says, "only love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13, 10).

The law being given as a guaranty of the relationship between God and his people, it was in the temple that this relationship was lived and made visible. In this context, the temple played an important role in the life of the people of Israel, as a place of an encounter with God. It was there that the Arch of Covenant was carefully kept. That is why, the temple was considered not only as a dwelling place of God in the middle of his people, but also as a sacred place par excellence, where God's people gathered to worship him. To come to that activity, the book of Leviticus provided with many stipulations to be respected.

Hence, the sacrifices to offer, which justified the presence of merchants, oxen, sheep, doves as well as the moneychangers. All this activity in the temple was legal. But, imagine a little bit a crowded and a commercial traffic like that we have during flea markets or in All Marts during Christmas Season. How could the atmosphere in the temple be? Although some would come to worship, others would be interested only in their profits and commercial benefits. It is in this context we have to situate Jesus' reaction.

From Jesus' reaction, let us draw some consequences. By chasing the merchants from the temple, Jesus reminds us that the relationship between God and human beings is not a matter of trade. Where this is overlook, there is a danger of degrading religion by using it for economic interests. And this is a continual temptation before us. I myself have been always embarrassed when people ask me: "Father, how much is the baptism? How much is the mass or the service you have performed"? I wonder if my answer, "Give what you have", is a good one.

Put with other words, I can say that by purifying the temple of "traders", Jesus declares that the time of the Messiah has begun, and he clearly and forcibly condemns every combination and confusion between religion and economic interests. This teaching will always apply to the Christian religion. The history of the church is full of sins of this type. Such a situation cannot be denied or justified. We cannot hear the word of Jesus without asking forgiveness for all that was in the past and the present time a misuse of religion.

Another consequence is that by his gesture, Jesus is inviting us to draw our attention to the interiority of our worship than to what is purely external and legalist. The true worship of God comes from a contrite and a sincere heart than a mere external fulfillment of duties so religious they may be. Jesus is calling us to the truth of our religious commitments and the sincerity of our faith.

Finally, by willing to destroy the existing temple and to restore anew, Jesus is displacing the heart of the cult. The new temple is not our churches or chapels made of stones. God does not need this type of dwelling, as he never needed the beautifully built temple of Jerusalem. We must ourselves become the temple of God. With Christ and in Christ we are the temple of the God. True faith in Christ consists in accepting to be turned, with him, into living stones of the new temple and in giving up one's life our brothers and sisters. May this time of Lent help us to understand that the only sacrifices acceptable to God are the works of charity, the generous service to our neighbors, especially the poorest, the sick, the weakest, the hungry and the naked. May God bless you!



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