

**3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT (Cycle B)**  
**March 11, 2012 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.**

Last week we heard the reading from Genesis about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, and the blessing God bestowed upon him as a result of his faith, Today we hear about the gift of the Ten Commandments to the Chosen People, and also to us. Together these events sort of represent two sides of the same coin, a turning point in salvation history.

Obviously, what God asked of Abraham was a test, a trial to assess Abraham's obedience. It was also a type, a prefiguring, of God's willingness to sacrifice His own Son.

Abraham struggled. And yet he was willing to obey. I imagine Isaac must have had misgivings about the whole thing as well. But it tells us of a turning point in human history, a step that leads us to a bigger step in today's reading from Exodus.

Human sacrifice has been practiced in many cultures throughout history. It probably wasn't all that unusual in the Middle East during Abraham's time. But we saw a step forward last week – the abolition of human sacrifice. This week we see another step forward – the beginning of going beyond mere ritual sacrifices to abstract ethical standards.

No longer is human life just an unending cycle of birth and death, an endless procession of summers, falls, winters and springs – cycles of plant, cultivate, harvest and rest, turning like a cosmic wheel. No longer are we just drifting aimlessly in a meaningless universe. No longer can we simply sacrifice a goat so that God will give us rain, no matter what else we do.

No longer is obedience to God just a simple observance of meaningless rituals, an endless cycle. No longer is mankind slumbering on a raft, drifting aimlessly on a featureless ocean. Now, there is a point to it all. Now, mankind has a future. Now, as Teilhard de Chardin put it, “We are moving!” We are going somewhere! Now there is a future for Abraham’s descendants. They will grow and prosper and progress.

And no longer is obedience to God simply ritual observance. Now there are abstract standards of behavior, expressed in the Ten Commandments. But consider that observance of the law is not confinement, but liberation – liberation from meaningless ritual observance.

No longer do we rely on simply following orders. Now we are expected to consider ethical standards at all times, and apply them to all we do – not just at goat-sacrificing time. God rescues us, He frees us, He makes a covenant with us, He shares His life with us. And from that relationship flows the commandments. God is not simply imposing something on us from the outside – He’s showing us a new way of life, and what it means.

God’s commands are given in the context of his relationship with us. We obey the commandments because we’re God’s children, not just because “God said so.” We respect life because God is life. We are to be truthful because God is truth. We are to be just because God is justice. To share in His life, we must strive to be like Him.

The commandments are not burdensome. As today’s psalm tells us, it all “refreshes the soul.” It shows the soul the way to happiness and fulfillment.

Our Lord's promise to raise up the temple of his body completes this whole context. Only through His resurrection can the life of God be given to us.

So what does God expect of us? How do we know our relationship with Him is what he wants? How do we, puny human beings, understand who God really is? One way we try to express it is by saying that God is holy, the All-Holy. He is God, not man. He is God, and we are not.

It begins when we acknowledge God's claim on us. We recognize that we are his people, and that must live in a way that reflects his holiness. Our covenant rests on our acceptance of His standards, and our future is His future for us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus purifies the temple of its corrupt and degrading influences, just as the Ten Commandments can cleanse us of what pollutes and defiles us. Christ's work today is a Messianic gesture. Jesus cleanses the Temple as the beginning of the final stage in the history of our relationship with God. Now, at last, we can offer God a worship worthy of Him. From now on our praise and adoration will be offered to Him through His Son. "Through him, with him, in him," we are now able to offer the Father "all glory and honor."

So it's not all that complicated. We go through Jesus, and we live according to God's will.

I waste a lot of time in a kind of verbal jousting with non-Christians, most of it on-line. I am often reminded that anti-Catholicism is the last socially acceptable bigotry in the United States, particularly among those on the left. Their

intellectual shallowness is astonishing. In most cases, I'm left with the feeling that if they were to finish high school and spend a year or two at a good community college, they might have something to say that's worth hearing.

And yet, they presume to preach to Christians regarding what Christians ought to believe and how Christians ought to act. One thing I hear often is how “hypocritical” Christians are. In most cases, it's just a matter of people justifying their own lack of religious commitment. But mostly, it expresses the misconception that we profess the faith but don't live it perfectly. Well, no, of course we don't. We're flawed human beings. Actually, we profess the faith **because** we don't live it perfectly, although we want to. It's a goal to which we aspire but can never fully realize.

Having said that, it's true that we cannot please God if we only praise him with our lips while our hearts and lives are far from Him and we're not really trying. All the ritual observance in the world is not worth much unless we want what God wants, unless we want to live in conformity with His plan for our lives.

He established a covenant with Israel, he gave us in the Ten Commandments, the blueprint for the basic structure of our relationship with Him. As we read through all that Jesus did and taught, we find that Jesus filled in many of the details.

Our spirituality, our religious practice, has to respect the way to God that God himself has established. The saints, and Mary the Mother of God, can help us, but Mary and the saints always point to Jesus. Christ must be at the center of our faith.

Reaching Christ is not just liturgical formulas and rituals and rote observances and following along in the missalette. It has to define our whole attitude to God and others, and to all the realities of life. We treat everyone around us as we would treat Christ himself.

Most of us read at least part of a newspaper every day. It wouldn't hurt us to read a chapter or two from the Gospels every day as well.

## READINGS

### Reading 1 Ex 20:1-17

In those days, God delivered all these commandments:  
"I, the LORD, am your God,  
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.  
You shall not have other gods besides me.  
You shall not carve idols for yourselves  
in the shape of anything in the sky above  
or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth;  
you shall not bow down before them or worship them.  
For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God,  
inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness  
on the children of those who hate me,  
down to the third and fourth generation;  
but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation  
on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain.  
For the LORD will not leave unpunished  
the one who takes his name in vain.

"Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.  
Six days you may labor and do all your work,  
but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God.  
No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter,  
or your male or female slave, or your beast,  
or by the alien who lives with you.  
In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth,  
the sea and all that is in them;  
but on the seventh day he rested.  
That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother,  
that you may have a long life in the land  
which the LORD, your God, is giving you.  
You shall not kill.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
You shall not covet your neighbor's house.  
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife,  
nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass,  
nor anything else that belongs to him."

### Responsorial Psalm Ps 19:8, 9, 10, 11

R. (John 6:68c) **Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.**  
The law of the LORD is perfect,  
refreshing the soul;  
The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,  
giving wisdom to the simple.  
R. **Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.**  
The precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;

the command of the LORD is clear,  
enlightening the eye.

**R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.**

The fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the LORD are true,  
all of them just.

**R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.**

They are more precious than gold,  
than a heap of purest gold;  
sweeter also than syrup  
or honey from the comb.

**R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.**

### **Reading 2 1 Cor 1:22-25**

Brothers and sisters:

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,  
but we proclaim Christ crucified,  
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,  
but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike,  
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.  
For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,  
and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

### **Gospel Jn 2:13-25**

Since the Passover of the Jews was near,  
Jesus went up to Jerusalem.  
He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves,  
as well as the money changers seated there.  
He made a whip out of cords  
and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen,  
and spilled the coins of the money changers  
and overturned their tables,  
and to those who sold doves he said,  
"Take these out of here,  
and stop making my Father's house a marketplace."  
His disciples recalled the words of Scripture,  
*Zeal for your house will consume me.*  
At this the Jews answered and said to him,  
"What sign can you show us for doing this?"  
Jesus answered and said to them,  
"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."  
The Jews said,  
"This temple has been under construction for forty-six years,  
and you will raise it up in three days?"  
But he was speaking about the temple of his body.  
Therefore, when he was raised from the dead,  
his disciples remembered that he had said this,  
and they came to believe the Scripture  
and the word Jesus had spoken.

While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover,  
many began to believe in his name  
when they saw the signs he was doing.

But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all,  
and did not need anyone to testify about human nature.  
He himself understood it well.