

## Readings for the Third Sunday in Lent

3<sup>rd</sup> March 2024

### First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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. 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. 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. 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.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

### Gospel: St John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' They then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

### **A Reflection for the Third Sunday in Lent**

I don't know if any of you are keen on cricket. I have a goddaughter who is both keen and rather good at the game, so I have to pay at least some attention. And, if you have paid any attention to cricket, you may have come across 'The Rules of Cricket'. They go something like this (please excuse the non-inclusive language):

You have two sides, one out in the field and one in.

Each man that's in the side that's in goes out, and when he's out he comes in and the next man goes in until he's out.

When they are all out, the side that's out comes in and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in, out.

Sometimes you get men still in and not out.

When a man goes out to go in, the men who are out try to get him out, and when he is out he goes in and the next man in goes out and goes in.

There are two men called umpires who stay out all the time and they decide when the men who are in are out.

When both sides have been in and all the men have got out, and both sides have been out twice after all the men have been in, including those who are not out, that is the end of the game!

Quite clear then?!

Last week, I spoke about discipline. Although I focussed on the positive nature of Lenten discipline in helping us draw closer to God, I also mentioned that discipline is often associated with rules. This week, in our Old Testament reading, we have perhaps the most famous set of rules ever compiled, the Ten Commandments. Other faiths have similar principles, and they provide a foundation for living well together as a society for our nation and many others.

These rules came with promise, that if the people kept them, God would be with the people and go before them. They are, perhaps, not quite as confusing as the rules of cricket but, as with all definitive rules, there can be difficulties understanding them and applying them in all situations. Indeed, lots of additional clarification from God followed immediately, and they were interpreted, re-interpreted and added to, by both God and humanity, over the centuries. And they led to the situation found in today's Gospel.

Amongst other things, the expanded rules and regulations required a whole variety of sacrifices, including those needed to atone for the fact that people were unable to keep the rules and needed redemption! This passage is set at the time of the Passover, so there would have been the Passover lambs as well as the animals and birds required for the other sacrifices. Pilgrims arriving at the Temple would need to buy these but, under Roman occupation, the usual coins couldn't be used in the Temple as they bore the image of Caesar who was given divine honour. So the Temple authorities had their own coins and pilgrims had to change their money to temple tokens in order to buy their sacrifices. We can picture the scene as busy, noisy and somewhat chaotic; God's house as a market place as Jesus describes it. It is a long way from what God intended – in the accounts of this incident in the other three Gospels, Jesus says that God's house should be a house of prayer. Jesus is indignant and takes action.

The difficulty with the Ten Commandments and associated rules and regulations was that human beings proved themselves incapable of living to God's standards. But all was not lost. God promised and then sent a saviour – only the saviour didn't match up to what was expected and ended up dying the most shameful of deaths.

As Christians, living two thousand years down the line from these events, we are so used to the idea that our redemption came through the crucifixion of Christ that we can forget how strange it is that a criminal execution, the epitome of dishonour, should be seen as good news. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, the message of the Cross is foolishness... at least, that is, if we look at it with human wisdom, with human understanding, without factoring in God.

In the Graeco-Roman culture of Corinth, gods made people successful, wise and wealthy. It was these things that gave a person status – perhaps not so different from our own culture. In this context, it was hard to relate to crucifixion as a success story. But Paul rejects this culture and this wisdom. Quoting Isaiah (29:14) *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart*, he tells us that God rejects the wisdom of the world, the wisdom which people have without considering God, wisdom that is human-centred.

Instead, God made a fool of the world's wisdom by doing the opposite of what was expected. God incarnate came down to human level and was crucified, the opposite of human ideas of power and wisdom, and yet achieved the deliverance of humanity, something humanity had failed to achieve through its own efforts and wisdom. Through the Cross, Christ demonstrated, paradoxically, that self-giving love is strength, that humility is strength.

To see the Cross as wisdom and strength means to completely change our way of thinking. We need to set aside our world ideas of success and material security, things which can be lost all too easily, despite our best efforts. Instead, as Jesus shows us, we need to prioritise self-giving love, an approach to life that no-one can take away from us. Self-giving love is the pattern for how we should relate to one another and to the world, which brings us back to the Ten Commandments. Although they required explanation, if we look closely, we find that the principles underlying them are a blueprint for how to live well together, honouring God, and valuing one another and all of creation.

We would probably all agree that rules are important for the maintenance of an orderly society – imagine how dangerous our roads would be without rules. And we definitely need our rules to be clearer than the Rules of Cricket. But rules on their own are not sufficient. We need wisdom – God's wisdom seen in Christ, so that ultimately the rules will become unnecessary as we follow Christ's example of perfect, self-giving love.