

## Lent 3 Year A 2018

I am taken back by our first reading to the balcony of the rather smoky atmosphere of the art-moderne interior of the Plaza Cinema, Truro of my childhood. Many will remember that in those far-off days it was only possible to see the great films of yesteryear when they made a reappearance at regular intervals in picture houses up and down our land. How thrilled I was by Charlton Heston, with bared teeth and that forward-thrusted chin, encountering the Burning Bush (from which God spoke with an American accent), the Exodus and parting of the Red Sea, together with the moment he ascended Mount Sinai and cowered as God wrote the Ten Commandments on the rock with fingers of fire! It might look dated now, but Cecil B. DeMille's Biblical epic certainly drew generations of people into the Biblical narrative through such spectacle. Now, alas, there is virtual Biblical illiteracy within much of British Society. The Church – the People of God- have much work to do in proclaiming knowledge of the pathway to God.

The word covenant has been to the fore over the past few weeks in our Old Testament readings. First, that with Noah, then last week, Abraham. Today we hear the most powerful message of Covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, signed and sealed in the words of the Ten Commandments. For Jews and Christians, the Decalogue is the foundation to the whole concept of not just humanity's relationship with God, but in those things which order the very society in which we live, and it is hard not to overemphasise their importance. Following the Reformation, virtually every church in our land would have had the commandments displayed prominently for the edification of those attending worship. Cuckfield's are now fixed to the wall of the tower – and I particularly like Thou shalt not steal – spelt 'steel' – very appropriate for an area of the great ironmasters of the Weald!

Perhaps even more extraordinary is the fact that this bedrock on which our society rests was revealed to a tiny tribal people many thousands of miles away in the Sinai desert. Ultimately what the Ten Commandments represent is freedom, a freedom expressed in the words, *'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'* In the expression of this freedom, it is important to remember that this is not an imposition on the Children of Israel, or indeed on us. What is represented in this relationship is the merciful goodness and presence of God within our lives, even in the most testing times. We are creatures of free will, and ultimately the negatives we see expressed within the Decalogue are essentially positives in leading us to growth of knowledge in the unfailing Love of God for humanity revealed through the way we ourselves live and interact with others.

The other important message from our readings today is the Fulfilment of this Covenant in its entirety through Jesus, who revealed the wisdom and love of God through the mystery of the cross. Paul writes powerfully *'that 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.'* Through giving himself on the cross, Christ is revealed as *the 'power of God and the wisdom of God.'* This turns human construct of power on its head, leading us to contemplate the mystery of Divine Love revealed in the face of Jesus.

The Gospel reading is from John's Gospel – a scene following immediately after the Wedding Feast at Cana. I have spoken over the past few weeks about Mark seeming to 'hang' the Gospel account on three scenarios concerning the confirmation of Jesus as Messiah. John frames *his* account on three Passover festivals, of which this is the first. He wants us to remember this powerful link to the account of Moses leading the Children of Israel to freedom at the first Passover. This is all to do with fulfilling and bringing about an everlasting covenant – the Pascal Mystery of Easter - the celebration of freedom for all humanity through sacrificial love, once and for all.

Forget Jesus meek and mild. Here is a full-blooded Jesus – furious, with whip in hand. He is forceful and radical, and this might make us feel uncomfortable, but the Lord challenges corruption through this action of expelling the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals and birds from the holiest place. Jesus has moved in the space of a few verses from provider of wine at a wedding feast to challenger of the norm in a way which makes him become the target of those who don't want their cosy lives to be disturbed.

Along with this furious scene is an explanation using ambiguity and misunderstanding about the nature of worship. This is one of John's devices to keep us on our toes. The Temple becomes the Temple of Christ's Body, and this challenges us to consider that we are drawn to know the fulness of God's Love is seen not only in sacral acts or ceremonies. This, alas, is sometimes the fault of the Church in locking God into some realm of 'churchy' sacredness. It is through the knowledge that in Jesus *'the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us,'* whilst also remaining in the bosom of the Father. Thus, it is as much in the everyday experience of humanity that the presence of God is seen, as well as in the sacred. We, in the great memorial of Christ's Passion and Death take ordinary things of the earth – bread and wine – and through them are fed and strengthened in the knowledge that we are called to enter a divine conversation with God through worship. We gather together to be strengthened with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and, yes, also, the church is open every day to enable people to be encouraged in their life pilgrimage in a sacred space.

As well as being fed at this table, we gather together in worship to be sent out to live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. This will sometimes mean that we are called to challenge situations and even norms to bring about the Freedom of God for all people. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu did this through truth and reconciliation in South Africa, Mother Teresa did it by picking up the dying from the gutter to bring them respect in death. Archbishop Oscar Romero did this in challenging corrupt government, Billy Graham through preaching and Malalah Yousfzai continues to do it through her brave campaigning for universal education. Countless unknown people seek to do this day by day throughout the world.

As we journey towards the Easter Feast, may we also seek to reveal the freedom of God's Love shown in Jesus Christ.



The Ten Commandments – directed by Cecil B DeMille

### **Exodus 20:1-17**

Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before<sup>[a]</sup> me.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation<sup>[b]</sup> of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

### **1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**

<sup>18</sup> For 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. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

<sup>20</sup> 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? <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

### **John 2: 13-22**

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> 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.

#### *Collect*

Almighty God,  
whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain,  
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:  
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,  
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

#### *Post Communion*

Merciful Lord,  
grant your people grace to withstand the temptations  
of the world, the flesh and the devil,  
and with pure hearts and minds to follow you, the only God;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.