

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT-MARCH 7, 2021

**READINGS: Exodus 20: 1-17;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25;
Gospel of John 2: 12-25**

Lent: Cleansing our lives of distractions

We begin today's reflection with a question. During this pandemic, what have you come to understand in your life as important that you didn't see before? Recent stories of the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on our lives show that more parents now spend more time with their children and in their studies, we now love to cook more, we do more exercise by walking, and we buy what we only need. It is also reported that we are learning to appreciate what others do for us. What is it that has made us recognize these things as important in our lives now rather than before? On this Third Sunday of Lent, the readings invite us to discern what we consider as spiritually important in our lives. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Exodus. The passage begins with, "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". Today's reading is one of the two versions of the Ten Commandments. The other version is reported in Deuteronomy, Chapter 5. God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai as the Israelites journeyed through the desert to the Promised Land. The Ten Commandments are the core of the laws of the Jewish people. The laws presume the special covenantal relationship between God and his people. The commandments provide direct regulations about the people's relations with God and with their neighbours. To be in a right relationship

with God, the Israelites had to be in a right relationship with their neighbours as well. One commandment talks about the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it”. The Sabbath is reserved for the Lord.

The story about the Ten Commandments in the first reading leads us to the Gospel passage from John. Today’s passage is usually referred to as the “Cleansing of the Temple”. Today’s story appears just after Jesus had performed the mighty deed of changing water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. Today’s passage begins, “The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem”. With this statement, we can see that the Evangelist John was emphasizing the importance of Passover, a festival when Jews came from all over the world to worship God in the temple. The temple was considered the religious, social and commercial center of Jerusalem. The animals were there because animal sacrifice had been given such a central role that having such livestock in the precincts did not appear out of place. Worshippers needed animals for their sacrifice. A temple official had to certify that the animals were flawless. So, for the convenience of the people, the temple allowed the sale of animals. Because of this certification protocol for animals brought from outside of the temple, the prices of animals were high for the majority of people.

The moneychangers had to be there to accommodate the Jewish worshippers who had come from all parts of the Roman Empire with their foreign coins. These foreign coins were considered ritually unclean and should be exchanged for shekels- the currency that was used in the temple. The clatter of coins resounded throughout the

temple court and echoed into the sanctuary of the temple. The sound might even have caused some distraction for worshippers in the temple.

Now we can see that Jesus' action in the temple broke the law. Jesus' action amounted to open defiance of the temple authorities. The trading at the temple had been the concern of some of the prophets. In the Book of Jeremiah, we read that God described the temple as a den of thieves (7:11). Jeremiah, Malachi and Zechariah had prophesied that in the messianic time, the time of fulfillment of all the promises, the temple would be cleansed of all the activities that were not worthy of it as a house of God.

Today's story about the Temple appears in all the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 21: 12-13, Mark 11:15-17 and Luke 19:45-47. However, today's passage about the encounter of Jesus and the Jewish leaders appears only in the Gospel of John. The Jewish leaders said to Jesus "What sign can you show us for doing this? In John the word "sign" means a "mighty act" that points to something else. Jesus responded to the question by telling the Jewish leaders, "Destroy this temple and three days I will raise it up". The Jewish leaders and the people only understood the literal level of what Jesus said. They therefore presumed that Jesus was talking about the temple. The Evangelist John had another meaning for the temple-- when Jesus referred to the temple he meant his body. When John wrote his Gospel, there was no temple. The temple had already been destroyed in 70 AD. At the time of writing the Gospel, the audience of John had started to doubt about the second coming of Jesus. John used today's story to emphasize the divinity of Jesus and to assure his audience that the risen Christ was among them.

The story of the cleansing of the temple is connected to today's second reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The Gospel tells us that it was only in the light of the resurrection that Jesus' disciples understood Jesus' identity and mission. Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead. In his Letter, Paul acknowledged that Jesus' death on the cross was shocking. Paul wrote, "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". According to Paul, the death of Jesus on the cross was considered to be futile to unbelievers, but the resurrection of Jesus from the dead had revealed the power of God.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as we continue our Lenten journey, what do we learn from today's readings? Today's readings are all connected to the spirituality of the Lenten season. The Ten Commandments are laws that talk about the love of God and neighbour. Fidelity to God goes beyond just obeying all the commandments. We don't keep the commandments so that God will love us. We keep the commandments because God loves us. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus did not come to abolish the laws but to fulfill them. According to Jesus, to love God is to love your neighbour. Jesus' action in the temple reminds us that the real purpose of the temple was to have a place for a solemn encounter with God. We encounter God through our encounter with Jesus. We encounter Jesus through our actions based on our faith-- our faith that is revealed in our love of neighbour. We encounter Jesus by offering ourselves to others.

During this Lent, how are we encountering Jesus in our lives? The stories that I shared with you earlier tell us that we are changing our ways of doing things. We have

learned to be creative. We have learned to make use of what is available to us to take care of ourselves and to care for others. We have learned to develop an attitude-- an attitude of understanding, gratitude and love that has brought us closer to each other than ever before. We are all growing as God's children. In fact it has been reported in one of the international Catholic magazines that Christians now consider spiritual reading, especially reading the Bible as an important spiritual exercise for spiritual growth. Lent is a time of discernment: we begin to see the deeper meaning of how we encounter our Lord. As Christians, offering ourselves for the service of others is a way to encounter the Lord. As we continue our Lenten journey let us ask God to cleanse our hearts from the distractions preventing us from encountering God in spirit and in truth.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that the homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance