

PASTORAL SECTION

HOMILETICS

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3rd Sunday of Lent (March 1)

COMMANDMENTS

I am a jealous God: love Me and keep My commandments—Ex. 20, 1-17

I am sure the first reading today had a familiar ring to it. All of us know the ten Commandments; many have memorized them. God gave us these laws not to confine us or restrict us, but to ensure our happiness and peace, even in this world. It were not for our darkened understanding we would not need to be told them at all. They are like the list of instructions we are given when we buy a new machine — we can ignore them, but we'll regret it. Those who made the machine knew what was best for it. God our Father knows infinitely more about us than we do about ourselves. He made us, and he gave us the Commandments precisely to make us happy.

God's 10 Commandments are not merely negative — they are not a fence round our lives to keep us from joyful living. On the contrary, they are like the fence a father in the City builds round his home to protect his children. He does not put up the fence to stop them enjoying life, but to help them enjoy life safely. The father's purpose is to stop his irresponsible children from straying into the dangerous traffic of the street. The 10 Commandments are like that, a guide for our protection and happiness, even though, like children, we cannot see their need and value sometimes.

Our approach to God's Commandments must be positive. No need to worry about false worship vv. 1-5 if we devote our time and energy

to worshipping God. The best way to avoid misuse of God's Name, v. 1 is to use it often with respect and love. Honoring parents v. 12 does not just mean avoiding disrespect and disobedience, it means going out of our way, making a special effort to be obedient. And so with all the 10 Commandments vv. 13-17.

You might wonder what is the connection between the Gospel account of Jesus cleaning the Temple *Jn.* 2; 13-25 and the 10 Commandments. There is a connection, a very important one, too.

The scene is vividly described. Jesus had just come to Jerusalem, the first visit in His public ministry. It was the Passover, the greatest of Jewish feasts. People flocked to Jerusalem at this time and the Temple was thronged. There was an enormous demand for sacrificial animals, foreign currency had to be changed for paying the Temple tax. With the connivance of authorities, unedifying abuses had crept in.

The very temple precincts were turned into a noisy, filthy market. Bedlam reigned — the bellowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the haggling of hucksters with pilgrims. Jesus had seen it all before, but now His public career had begun. He made a whip (the only thing He made of which we are told) and with majestic power drove all pellmell out of His Father's house — the outward sign, till that time, of God's presence with His people. The excitement brought the officials — and He told them that from now on His Body was the Temple, that the old order was over. That God's people would now include all nations (*Mk.* 11,17) in a law of love.

The people sensed that here was no ordinary teacher. He had not come to destroy the Law (*Mt.* 5:17) but to build on it, to perfect it. The Covenant of Precepts would give way to the Covenant of Love.

A scribe asked Jesus what was the great commandment of the Law. He said; "You shall love your God with your whole heart, with all your soul and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two Commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." *Mt.* 22, 36-40. An all-embracing love for God and all men including the one who keeps it — it exceeds and supercedes everything in the 10 Commandments.

These two Commandments go together — in practice they are one. To neglect either for the sake of the other would be self-deception. "If anyone says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar and the truth is not in him." *Jn.* 4,20. Don't regard a neighbour as just a useful means of coming to the love of God. Don't treat people just as stepping stones to God. It is not a fiction that Jesus is in us, identifies Himself with us. "Whoever receives such a little child in My Name, receives Me." "As often as you did it to the least of these my little ones, you did it to Me."

See and love God as the Father He is. If we regard Him as anything less, we caricature Him, and will never recognize our brothers and sisters in His Family. Love and serve Him in His favorite dwelling — our neighbour.

Don't think of ourselves as worthy because we break none of the 10 Commandments. "When you have done all that is commanded, say, 'we are unprofitable servants, we have only done what is our duty.'" *Lk.* 12, 37. No, 'love is the fulfilment of the Law.' And not just a negative charity. You do not fulfil the Law just by avoiding unkind thoughts or words or actions. Charity means to go out of our way in order to allow Christ in us to think, speak and act, with our own self-forgetfulness, towards others. "If anyone truly loves his brethren, the love of God has reached full growth in Him."

4th Sunday of Lent (March 8)

SAVED THROUGH REVERSES

God's message today comes in the form of the briefest summary of an important turning-point in the history of God's first people. *2 Chron.* 36.14-23. From the king down, they had broken their covenant of faithfulness to God v. 14. He had warned them repeatedly through His prophets, but they had to learn their lesson the hard way — through reverses. About 600 years before Christ was born, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, ravaged the Temple and city, burned it to the ground, demolished the walls, and took the people on a death march to an exile that lasted seventy years.

Their king was forced to watch the slaughter of his sons and nobles, and then his eyes were gouged out with a spear. The rest of his life he would remember in prison the last scene his eyes had watched, and realize that he had personally set that scene by obstinately resisting God's word. As for the people, it is a marvel that they survived, that their history did not end altogether. But it was the Exile that chastened and purified them. When it was over and they returned to rebuild their Temple and city, vv. 22 & 23, they were a better, more dedicated People of God than ever. "They will be My people and I will be their God." *Jer. 32.39*. It was through afflictions like this that they turned back to God. Salvation through reverses is surely the lesson God has for us today. We need not go back to the Exile for such examples. We see them all around us. Nothing draws us together like a common disaster like the Japanese occupation, or a national tragedy like President Magsaysay's death. How often, in a family when brothers are estranged, an illness, a misfortune or parent's death — these things bring us back to one another and to God.

St. John records Our Lord's teaching on this theme, *John 3.14-21*. The dominant idea of all we've just heard from His lips is the necessity of His redeeming death. "He must be lifted up" i.e. crucified, raised on the Cross, to win for His humanity and ourselves everlasting life (v.14). Moses, at God's command, set up a brazen serpent as a divine remedy for snakebite and a symbol of salvation through Jesus crucified. A non-poisonous image, used with faith, healed wounds and saves us for eternal life.

God the Father was the principal mover in our redemption. It was He who sent His Son out of sheer love for us. It was love that made God give and deliver to death His co-equal Son, His infinitely beloved Son, so that all who accept Him and His way of life should be saved from eternal perdition and brought to everlasting life, vv. 15-17. It was not to condemn the world, far from it, it was to save the world that God sent His Son, v. 17.

All that is asked of us is belief — on our belief or unbelief depends our everlasting salvation or damnation. We know that this belief means a total surrender to God, made in complete honesty and sincerity.

The latter part of today's Gospel tells us why an unbeliever, one who refuses to face up to the demands of God's revelations, is damning himself even now — it is because he deliberately chooses to stay away from the light. If a man whose eyesight is good refuses to come out of a totally dark place, he is no better off than a blind man, even though it be high noon outside — he establishes himself in blindness, vv. 19-21.

What does Jesus mean by "doing the truth and so coming to the light?" v. 21. St. Augustine tells us: "Admitting our sinfulness, not flattering ourselves, not saying 'I am just' when we really are not... Diseased eyes hate the light, whereas healthy eyes love it. God (that is, the light) accuses you of sin; if you admit it, you are one with God, you are joined to God. God made man, and man made himself a sinner. Destroy what you made, that God may love what He made."

What the Exile did for the first People of God, Christ's acceptance of His Passion has done for us. We will be formed into a people, united in the Holy Spirit of love, and with Christ's readiness to pour ourselves out for all, even those who persecute us.

So noble, so beyond human imagining is this kind of love that men call it divine. Jesus practised it all His life, and He commands us to do the same. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you." That was said even as He was being betrayed by Judas. And next day He gave us a final and devastating demonstration of what He meant — He died on a cross for us. "Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends." He insists that He expects the same of us. "If Christ laid down His life for His brethren, we in our turn ought to be ready to lay down our lives for the brethren."

His redeeming death sums up His lifetime of self-giving. Our salvation is secured by our readiness to pour ourselves out personally in absolute service for all. If we do anything less, we obscure the image of Christ that others have a right to expect to see in us. If only they could see as, a people staunchly united among ourselves because united to God, and this through His Son's redeeming death, then the world would be saved.

As the Jews learnt from the Exile what it meant to be God's people, so "may it be seen that our deeds have been wrought in God." v.21.

5th Sunday of Lent (March 15)

THE NEW DISPENSATION

The Old Testament is like a mirror — we can see ourselves reflected there. Jesus and His Apostles tell us to see the stories of the Old Covenant as reflections of His earthly life and our life with Him now. Seeing the fulfillment of these old-time incidents in Christ is like a joyful rediscovery of Him. Children in a family where a story from the Bible is read as part of daily family prayer (thank God, the number of such families is increasing) will say of a Bible story: "I imagine it is happening to me." When we see that these events were prophecies in action, the New Testament takes on a richer meaning. Their full meaning is clear to us now that we can see how they have been fulfilled in Christ, and are still being fulfilled in us. As a result, we grow in our affection of Him, there is less chance of His becoming too ordinary for us.

Jeremias, for example, is encouraging God's people. They are depressed — they have seen 10 of the 12 tribes of God's chosen People conquered by Assyria, (721 B.C. — see 4 *Kings* 17) and scattered to the 4 winds. They disappeared without a trace, a chastisement that befell them because of their infidelity. Needless to say, the remnant, the remaining two tribes were shaken and felt insecure. Jeremias reassures them. God will make a New Covenant with a new people (us) in which Christ will be the High Priest. *Jer.* 31. 31-36. The Old Covenant is described as a marriage between God and His People — a vivid image of how intimate God wants to be with us. v. 32.

But to fully realize how this promise was to be fulfilled, we have to turn to the New Testament, where our condition under the New Covenant is described. Time and again this prophecy is recalled in the pages of the New Testament e.g. *Rom.* 11.27; *Heb.* 10.16-17, in fact the very passage we've just heard is quoted in full *Heb.* 8:8-12. And we are told that the complete fulfillment came in Christ, not in His earthly life, but *now* in the risen life He shares with us. It is as Mediator of the New Covenant, with us all days, reconciling us with God, forgiving our sins, that He fulfills this prophecy. Now His death was

a necessary condition for ratifying the New Covenant *Heb.* passim. e.g. 8.22, as we'll now see.

St. John is the only Evangelist who tells us of this event. It happened on Palm Sunday *Jo.* 12:20-33. Some Greeks wanted to meet Jesus. Philip and Andrew approached Him with their request. It is clear that Jesus did not say yes. These men had been moved by the apparent triumph of Palm Sunday. But that was not the real triumph of Jesus. His name was to be great among the Gentiles in another way. His answer shows how He would draw all men to Himself by His death which would be followed by His resurrection. "And, if I be lifted up (i.e. crucified) will draw all men to Myself" v.32. To illustrate this, He gives the example of a seed that produces new life at the cost of its own destruction and burial in the earth. v.24.

What follows is a quite dramatic foretaste of the agony in the Garden. He revealed that His Passion was very near, so near as to be already upon Him. vv. 23-25. The vivid image of His death brings a tremor of fear, freely permitted indeed, but so terrible as to force from Him the prayer: "Father, save Me from this hour." v.27. Then He reflects that it is precisely for this that He had become man, to establish the New Covenant in His Blood. He immediately prays that His Father's Name be glorified in His covenanting sacrifice. And now what had happened at His Baptism and transfiguration occurs again. For the third time, the heavens are opened and the Father's voice heard, v. 28, explaining for the bystanders' sake vv. 29-30 that God's glory and men's salvation would be attained in the Covenant ratified by Christ's Blood.

This startling occurrence was seized on by Jesus to stress again the law of self-denial that He had so often proclaimed. He contrasted the empty life of the selfish, closed in on their own interests and the everlasting loss it would bring, with the eternal life of those who, forgetting their selfish concerns, take up their cross like Him. vv. 25-26. Another text comes to mind: "Although He was Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered, and being made perfect. He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him." *Heb.* 5.8-9.

The cross frightens us, but it also frightened Jesus. We naturally recoil from suffering, so did He. But our entry into the New Cove-

nant calls for nothing less than a dying to our selfishness, a crucifixion of our selfish tendencies.

If a man is ill and the doctors cannot detect the deep-seated cause of his illness, they take an X-ray. We should do the same in regard to our sinfulness. Lent is a time for serious examination of our deepest motives. Get right down to the roots, right down to bedrock. And then, like a doctor who has learned from an X-ray the need for drastic surgery, let's courageously remove the obstacles to a life of uncomplicated integrity and sincerity. "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light."

In this merciless self-appraisal, we will make a mature contribution to a world caught up in a rat-race of pleasure-seeking, looking for lasting happiness where it can never be found. Then we will do our part towards the fulfilling by the Christian community of our new and everlasting Covenant with God in Christ. And surely that is what Lent is all about.

Palm Sunday (March 22)

THE PASSION SEEN AS SERVICE

How often Jesus is referred to in the Bible as a servant! How often He described Himself as a servant and His life work as a service! The prophecy of Isaiah that we've just heard *Is. 50. 4-7* is one of the famous "Servant Songs" — it tells of the persecution and suffering that would fall to the lot of God's Incarnate Son. He would give His back to the scourges and submit to the spittle and slaps *v.6* and all the insults of His Passion as the culmination of His life of service, in fulfillment of His Father's Will. Liberating victory would follow. *v.7*.

See Jesus' Passion in this light. His whole life was a service, to His Father first of all: "I came not to do My own Will, but the Will of Him who sent Me." But, it was also a service of His brothers—ourselves. "I have stood in the midst of you as one who serves." He came "not to be served, but to serve." The Gospel describes Him so taken up with preaching, instructing, healing that He sometimes "had

no time to eat." His approach to authority was revolutionary indeed: "He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant."

The narrative of Our Lord's Passion and death which you have just heard *Mk.* 15.1-37 shows Him climaxing His life-time of service with a free and willing acceptance of death on our behalf. To appreciate the full meaning of His service, we must look to His death. Christ's Passion and death is a two-fold service—one of adoration to His Father, and one of liberation for us His brothers.

He gave this supreme example of service in the face of betrayal. In recording the washing of His disciples' feet and the first Mass, the Gospel stresses that both took place "on the night He was betrayed." He gave "the uttermost proof of His love" in the face of outright treachery and basest betrayal, sold for 30 shekels, "the price of a slave." It is sheer folly but in God's view, it is forever the ultimate in service.

To human eyes, there is nothing fruitful in such a kind of service—bridging the gap sin had made between Himself and mankind.

Moreover, Jesus gave His service in the face of mockery. The ridicule before Herod's court, the derision of the thorn-crowning reached a crescendo as His enemies surged around the cross, taunting and despising Him. Yet through it all, Christ the Servant is preoccupied with obedient service to His Father's Will, totally given over to the redeeming of those who crucified Him. This was not weakness—when the honor of God or the good of others demanded it, He could and did speak out, but nothing could make Him deviate from the course laid down by His Father for our deliverance. There is a quality in Christ's service that men would not dream of considering—"There's no percentage to it, it gets you nowhere." Yet, what did this life of service achieve? The greatest benefit ever conferred on the world—Redemption.

Sometimes in the Book of Isaias, God uses the word servant of a whole people: "Israel, My servant." *Is.* 41.18. How do we reconcile the servant people and the individual suffering Servant? For a Christian the answer is simple—the Person-servant is Christ, and the servant People His Church—ourselves. Specially since *Vat. II* has the role of the Church as servant of the world been re-stressed. Her function is to save, not to condemn, to serve, like Christ, not to be served.

The Church's vocation is the same as Christ — to honor God and fulfill His Will by bringing justice to the oppressed, working for the removal of misery. The Church is the visible continuing of Christ's presence in the world. She brings about this presence by establishing true Christian communities.

Each Christian in the Church is called to a similar life of service. We are other Christs and must live His life, serving our brothers in complete self—forgetfulness, even if, like Christ, we be misunderstood, or meet with ingratitude or contempt. "He who will not take up his cross and follow Me, cannot be My disciple."

Needless to say, this kind of service is humanly impossible. Only the might and power of God could give us the attitude of Christ. But, with His infinite help, we will begin to measure up to Christ's standard—a realization that it is God's Will that our salvation and resurrection come about through a constant, crucifying readiness to give ourselves unselfishly to others, even if like Christ our love is met with disdain, even contempt.

We are not alone. Christ lives in us, we share His life. We are thrilled when we think how recent Popes have been faithful to their noblest title — "Servant of the servants of God." We are those servants of God, and, no less than the Pope, we too must serve our Father in His other children, in a love that persists even when there is no return.

Holy Thursday (March 26)

COMMUNION

The need to share with others is implanted in our hearts. Last July, for the first time since creation, a man stepped on to the moon. His first thought was of his fellow-men. "A small step for a man, a giant step for mankind." The day before that Gloria Diaz hit the headlines as Miss Universe and her first thought too was of others. "If only my parents and my brothers and sisters were here now to share my happiness."

This idea of sharing looms very large on Holy Thursday. The master-idea of Christianity is an interchange with Christ and with one another of all goods, both human and divine. God became human so that we might become divine. In God's plan, man's life is meant to share in the personal life of the Trinity. Man is meant by God to be His son in Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit. How do we enter into communion with one another that we get to enter into communion with the Divine Persons? The answer may surprise you. It is by communion with one another that we get to enter into the inner life of God. The Bible says so. "We share with you, so that you may have communion with us, and that our communion may be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ." 1 Jo. 1.3.

It was at His life's most solemn moment, at the Mass which set His Passion in motion, that Jesus prayed to His Father for us "that they may be one in Us." And this was how the early Christians lived. "The multitude of the believers had but one heart and one soul." Jesus stressed on that same night that this sharing, this communion was to be the mark of His authentic followers, the witness to His mission, "that the world may know that You have sent Me."

"See how these Christians love one another," was the comment of the pagans and the beginning of their interest in Christ's message. What was the fountain-head of this universal practical charity? What was the source of this phenomenon in the world just after Christ? The Bible tells us — it was the common sharing of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and banquet. The way the first Christians saw it, and the way we should see it is this: our incorporation in Christ and one another began at our baptism, and is intensified and perfected in the Eucharist. It was the communion with Christ that brought about the Christian charity of the early years. It must be the same today.

How to reduce this into practice is not so obvious. The readings we have just heard show us. The Paschal meal Ex. 12.1-14 was a liturgy—readings, prayers, hymns and blessings accompanied the sacred meal. In the meal itself one bread was broken to be shared by all, and one chalice divided. This was the setting in which Jesus celebrated the first Eucharist—at a liturgy of sharing. And the Eucharist He left us does more than express unity between us — it brings it about. God's

plan to make Christ the centre of all communities, to gather all communities into one, is realized and effected at Mass—the Lord's Supper.

A sharp shock of contrast comes into the orderly procedure of the Paschal ritual *Jo.* 13.1-15. The Last Supper is already under way, and Jesus introduces something all His own. He abruptly interrupts everything to give a dramatic demonstration of what self-giving and service really mean. He rises from the table, removes His outer garments, girds Himself with a towel and proceeds, like a slave, to wash the feet of His disciples, including those of Judas the traitor.

We keep the memory of this amazing incident alive by reenacting it today. But it is not so much the specific act of feet washing that is stressed as the attitude of mind, the readiness to serve in the face of treachery, of blackest ingratitude. It shows how the community of faith is to be built up—through service, as tomorrow's crucifixion, pre-enacted now, will exemplify. His death crowns His life of service, and puts a spotlight on its purpose—"to gather into one the people of God who are dispersed."

Jesus tells us so now. "I have given you an example, so that, as I have done to you, so also you in your turn ought do to one another." As we recall the humble self-forgetting that Jesus displayed at the first Eucharist, let us resolve that, come what may, we will be ready to go to the ends of the earth, to lay down our lives even, for our brethren.

We will play our part in moulding our society in the exact degree that we have learned, from our worshipping together, the power of true communion with one another in Christ. He, the whole Christ, Head and members, is the way; living in us, loving through us, He is the point of entry into that wonder of unity in diversity, the intimate life of God, our ultimate goal.

Easter Sunday (March 29)

ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA

"This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." Today is the summit, the climax of all feasts, the Feast

which contains all others. For Christ is alive! He rose this day to a new and altogether marvellous life, and we rose with Him! "The death He died was a death once for all to sin, the life He now lives is a life to God." *Rom. 6.10*. So also we, dead to sin, must live as new men, resurrected men, Easter men.

Two days ago we saw Him dead — the ransom for our sins. "He bore our sins in His Body upon the tree." But now, that is all over and passed. He has risen, glorious and triumphant, the conqueror of death and hell. And that is not the whole of the story. He has brought us with Himself. He rose, and we share in His resurrection — every day is an Easter day for us.

Our new life must be in striking contrast to the old. *Col. 3.1-4*. At baptism the life giving water like a cleansing flood, swept away the old allegiance to sin. Our baptism inserted us into the death and resurrection of Our Lord. Yet, our baptism was only the beginning. It has left us with a full life-program v.l. "Consider yourselves as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ." *Rom. 6.11*. "We have died, once for all, to sin, can we breathe its air again?" *Rom. 6.2*.

It is a life-long task, remaining, abiding in His love. Friendship with Christ is like no other. In return for actually believing in Him and trusting Him, He offers us His own risen life. Not a share in a life outside our own, as with other friends, but His own inner life lived in us by Himself. Friendship with Christ is not easy. We don't see Him directly as we see our other friends. We only see and contact Him through other people and through signs like the Sacraments. We have to work and keep on working, producing the fruits of faith in love. Faith apart from works is barren *Js. 2.20*, is dead v. 17. A man is justified by works and not by faith alone v.2.26. "Work while it is day," said Jesus, "the night comes when no man can work." What works? Acts of kindness, God-inspired kindness, Christ-like kindness to all irrespective of our personal feelings towards them. Then our resurrection is guaranteed.

We are to live, which means to think, to love, to act in the pulsating divine life that fills Christ's glorified humanity. "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me." Raised with Christ, we must struggle on, here

on earth with painful effort, resisting our fallen nature. But this is the means to something surpassing all understanding, the culmination of all when we, Christ's members, are joined with our Head in manifest glory. v.4.

Led by the Spirit of God Who dwells in us, we must wage a deadly, relentless war on selfishness. Realize vividly the unity with Christ and one another that we entered into at baptism. We are fellow-citizens one with the other in the City of God, and most intimately related with one another, through Christ our Brother, in God's family. Our risen life means freedom — I don't mean that we are free to sin, but freed from sin if only we let our baptism flower in our lives. His risen glory will remain ours as long as we remain faithful to our resurrection — our baptism.

St. John gives us the details of our Lord's appearance to Mary Magdalene *Jn.* 26.1-9. She comes before dawn to the sepulchre. The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. Her reaction is rapid. She hurries to tell Peter and John, and while they inspect the tomb, she stands outside, weeping. After they have gone, she herself enters. And there she sees two angels in dazzling white. Why is she grieving? they ask. "Because they have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him."

What follows is dramatic indeed. She turns away, and there stands Someone. Her tear-dimmed eyes and her distracted mind fail to recognize the Risen Savior, even after He speaks to her. Of all things, she thinks He is the gardener. And then He speaks again. He calls her by name: "Mary!" No mistaking that voice — He is alive, He has risen, as He said He would.

Mary Magdalene represents fallen men faced with discouragement. The big thing is not to let our hope be damaged, to keep searching for Christ. And when we have found Him at last, we will realize, like the Magdalene did, that we are more deeply loved than ever we could imagine.

Yes, we have much to identify with in Mary Magdalen's story. Maybe we've already found Him, maybe we've learned to love so much that all has been forgiven. His commission to us is the same as it was to this highly-strung woman, the very first to see Him risen: "Go tell my brethren that I am risen and still with you." Maybe we can't often speak of Christ. But all of us must radiate by our lives the fact that He is alive, and we are alive with His life. Since His ascension, He is no longer visible as man. Right now, our fellow-men will see no other Christ but us. They will not sense His love, His concern for them unless we show them our genuine love and concern. We are the visible image of the Invisible Christ.

Let our every action, everything in our lives proclaim in triumphant tones: "He is risen! He is still with us! I have found Him and will not let Him go!"