

3rd Sunday of Lent (B)
(Exodus 20:1-17 / John 2:13-25)
04.032018

Dear brothers and sisters,

This morning I invite you to meditate upon the first reading from the book of Exodus which we have just heard. It is the well-known narrative of “the Ten Commandments”, God’s words of life to his people, also called “the Decalogue”, what tradition calls simply: “the Ten Words”. You remember: “You shall not...you shall not... you shall not...”

However, have you noticed that the first of these Ten Words does not begin with “You shall not”? In fact it reads: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”. So the first Word of the Lord to his people – to us – is not an interdiction (you shall not) but a positive statement: I love you, my people, and I set you free from servitude. I want you to serve me freely and lovingly. If you want to remain free and not fall anew into slavery, I propose to you Ten Words of life which will teach you how to remain free. It is good to listen to these words of life which are still relevant for us today and can really help us to remain free as we relate to God, others and ourselves.

“You shall have no gods except me”. The Word of the Lord is clear: If we want to remain free, we have to worship God our Creator and not idols, false gods. It is so easy to worship idols! There are so many of them! Let us consider just one of them this morning: our political affiliation! We can so easily become slaves of a political party, in such a way that we become incapable of working with members of other political parties for the good of all the inhabitants of the country. A political program can so easily become an idol that we choose to worship it or even that we feel forced to do so. Political parties are necessary to help us organize our common life in the country and regulate the relationships of our country with other countries. But even the best program of a political party is not something absolute. It never contains the Whole truth with a capital ‘T’. It should always be open to the challenge of the Word of God, especially the gospel, which is the ultimate reference. A political party is not a god but only a useful and necessary means. The Lord alone is God.

If we want to remain free, the Lord invites us to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy... you shall do no work that day”. In other words, we have to be careful not to become slaves of our work, not to become workaholics. Our work too can so easily become an idol, our unique “raison d’être”. When we situate ourselves in this perspective, ‘we are what we do’, which is an erroneous statement, because we are much more than what we do. Those who are slaves of their work have no time left to be with God, with themselves, and with others, especially their family. Their loved ones are neglected and suffer from it. When time for retirement comes, they become deeply depressed: They were their work; they were what they were doing. When they stop doing it, they stop being and existing. Suddenly they have the impression to have become nothing. Work is important, indeed necessary, it has to be well done, but it must not become our sole preoccupation. To keep the Sabbath day holy – understand Sunday – is important for us if we want to remain free human beings. In our daily lives, God should hold the first place and not our work. When God holds the first place, then all else will fall into place.

Among the ten Words of the Lord, there is one which is not negative: “Honour your father and mother”. In the past, father and mother were part of the family and were never forgotten. Today, in a society where we move around a lot, where husband and wife work, father and mother can become a burden. We don’t know what to do with them. So many elderly people die not surrounded by their family, but often lonely in a care home. There is no black or white solution to this situation. Nursing home care can be necessary, but father and mother must remain a preoccupation for us: “Honour your father and mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God has given to you”. If we want to live to the full, we have to honour father and mother. Let us never forget that we have received life and faith from them. If a tree is cut off from its roots, it dies.

If we want to remain free and in accord with God’s heart in our relationships with others, we have to respect them and to respect what belongs to them. We have to respect our boundaries and their boundaries. It is in this perspective that we have to hear these words of the Lord: “You shall not kill” (with a gun... with our tongue...or in our heart...), “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, your neighbour’s wife, etc...” To respect others is to renounce to use them, or even abuse them. They belong to God and not to us. What belongs to them has been given to them and not to us. To respect others is to renounce to treat them as scapegoats, that is to say to build up a pseudo-peace within us or a pseudo unity between us at the expense of their own lives. It does not work. It is unfair. It is unjust.

As we continue our Lenten pilgrimage, it is good to take time to reflect on these Ten Words of the Lord. They are Words of life. They are a light for our path.