

210307 The Third Sunday in Lent: Morning Prayer

The Lord be with you. **And with your spirit.**

God the Father, by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead, raise you up to walk with him in the newness of his risen life.

Let us confess our sins to God our Father.

Heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault;

by what we have done and by what we have failed to do.

We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ who died for us,

forgive us all that is past;

and grant that we may serve you in newness of life

to the glory of your name. Amen

Absolution Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Exodus 20:1-17 [The Ten Commandments]

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. For 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.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Psalm 19

John 2:13-22 [Jesus Cleanses the Temple]

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.' The Jews 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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ

Hymn: John Shera

Sermon

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer.

That very familiar dedication is taken from the psalm appointed for today – psalm 19. Read the whole psalm again: it gives us pointers to faith – to belief in God.

The gospel recounts Jesus' so-called cleansing of the Temple. Many people must have been puzzled by his radical action, even seeing it as a form of hooliganism! I prefer to see it as Jesus questioning the Temple as the unique point of access to God. I hear his message as saying that the kingdom of God is *among you*; not in a building, however fine. Not in rules and hierarchies. Even at this early stage in his ministry, Jesus is pointing us to our baptism – to the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

But all today's readings shine some light on the difficulty that we wrestle with – the difficulty of belief in the unseen God. Why should we rational, educated, modern Western Europeans have any need of God; of what theologians call "the Other" when they don't want to use the word "God"? I think it is precisely because we are rational beings that we believe in God. And it is because we are social beings that we are drawn back to our ethical and moral precepts. And where do we find those? In the Bible. Ethics. How to live honourably. Here's an old tale of ethical wisdom which illuminates that: A boy asked his grandfather: "Why do men fight?" He replied: "Every man, sooner or later, is called to do so. For every man there is always a battle waiting to be fought, to win or lose. Because the fiercest clash is the one between the two wolves."

"What wolves, grandfather?"

"The wolves every man carries inside himself."

The boy didn't understand. Finally the old man, who had the wisdom of time inside him, resumed: "There are two wolves in each of us. One is bad and lives a life of hate, jealousy, envy, rancour, false pride, lies and selfishness.

The old man paused again, this time to allow him to absorb what he had just said.

"And the other?" "The other is the good wolf. He lives a life of peace, love, hope, generosity, compassion, humility and faith." The child thought for a moment about what his grandfather had just told him. Then he expressed what was especially on his mind. "And which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee turned to look at him and replied, "The one we feed more".

This little tale shows us our primeval need for some kind of personal morality; for an ethical basis for our social behaviour. And today we are given a smorgasbord of ethical teaching from our Christian source, the Bible.

Our readings were originally selected for the schooling of catechumens – of people preparing for baptism. They give us the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) from the Book of Exodus. They give us the "preaching of Christ crucified" in Paul's first Letter to the people of Corinth.

And from John's Gospel we are given a glimpse of Jesus, not just as an ordinary man in the Jerusalem Temple, but as the Son of God in his Father's Temple – this God/Man who gives us the promise, the hope, of Resurrection.

There, in a nutshell of two readings and a psalm, we have the bedrock of our ethics and our moral foundation; of our belief in God. Of our hope and trust - in the Scriptures. But – to be rationalistic about it – where did all this ethical and moral teaching come from? I'm not going to try here to prove the historicity of the New Testament writings – I have no problem believing that they have come down to us with great accuracy. But how about the Ten Commandments? We were all brought up with the certainty that God delivered them to

Moses on tablets of stone on the slopes of Mount Sinai. They are certainly a component of the Covenant between God and the Israelite nation.

But they aren't unique. There is a long-standing legal tradition in the ancient Near East, reaching right back to the end of the third millennium BCE, where famous law codes were associated with the names of the Mesopotamian kings. They gave guidance and arguments for questions of conscience, and are more like the actual practice of law. They speak of promoting the welfare of the people; to cause justice to prevail in the land; that the strong might not oppress the weak, etc.

The Israelite Commandments were different, though – they gave incontrovertible direction on matters of ethical law. They are essentially negative – “thou shalt not” – and are well suited to proclamation to a tight grouping, to a nation of shared ethnicity and beliefs. I see them as inspired by God.

Whether we believe every detail of the mythic origins of the Moses sagas or not, these Commandments were seen to be fundamental to the origins of distinctively Israelite theology and practice. They are repeated almost word for word in Deuteronomy, and referred to all over the Old and New Testaments.

The Commandments begin with a reminder that it is God who leads us from that which enslaves us. They can free us from the confinement of excessive busy-ness; from wanting more and more; from obsessions with our desires and cravings.

They lay out boundaries and help us set priorities by God's standards. They are the origin of our Western ethics.

We all know that the first four Commandments are about our duty to believe and trust in God. We are to put God first, and to put nothing in God's place. That's very Islamic, by the way! They help us to understand deeper meanings – about not making idols, whether graven images or other things that we might worship, like fame, or money, or property, or .. whatever you wrestle with.

We are told to set aside time to step back from the world and reflect on God's ways; through worshipping him with our fellow believers, through prayer and studying about the things of God. Somebody said wisely, “If the church does nothing other than to keep open a house ... symbolic of the homeland of the soul, it will have rendered society and each of us a service of un-measurable value.”

The last six Commandments are about our duty to care for and respect our neighbours – to put them first. We honour human life; we deplore war, we work for peace. We rid our hearts of malice and hatred, and we seek to become one with what God has created. We use all bodily desires as God intended; we remain faithful in human relationships; we deal with others honestly and fairly; we work for freedom and justice. We do not simply refrain from lying, but we have the courage to tell the truth. We resist the all-too-human temptation to have what is not ours.

Orthodox Jews remind themselves continually of these Commandments by reciting the summaries in Deuteronomy ch. 6: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” and, from Leviticus ch. 18 “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

Every Christian, every Jew also repeats those two summaries of the Law. They summarise our belief in God, and they summarise the ethics of our behaviour to our fellow human beings. There is no better way. It is literally “The Way”.

Follow that Way.

Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

The Collect of the third Sunday in Lent

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.
Amen.

Keep your Church secure from the dangers of worldliness and greed. Give grace to your ministers, to preach
the gospel of Christ and to fulfil your commandments both in their words and in their lives. ... *hear our prayer*

Pity the world where ignorance and prejudice often rule. Give true wisdom to all in authority. Pardon and
cleanse the individuals and organizations whose goodness has been corrupted by love of gain.
... *hear our prayer*

Bless our families and friends, with such reverence in our faith that we may value the holiness that is in other
people. Grant to those who conduct their business in this community the spirit of fair dealing and mutual
respect.
... *hear our prayer*

Have mercy on all who are sad, or lonely, or injured, or in hospital at this time; those who are sick and
suffering with COVID-19. We remember before you all whose lives are affected, all who are entering into the
darkness of uncertainty, that each in their weakness may know your strength. We pray that you will support
those who are caring for them, and we ask that you cherish their quiet ministry.
... *hear our prayer*

We pray for the departed who having worshipped in this world have died with Christ and been raised up with
him. May they rejoice in the heavenly Temple where he is the eternal light. *Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, **Amen.**

Dismissal

May God who gives patience and encouragement,
give you a spirit of unity to live in harmony as you follow Jesus Christ, do that with one voice you may glorify
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always.

Live streamed from St. Matthew's Church, Irishtown.
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