

May we become a living temple of God's love

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Lent 3b

Before the readings

Our Bible readings today sound like they're all about rules and regulations. That makes me start thinking about the trouble I get into when I break rules.

But then I think how big sisters and brothers protect little kids when a bully tries to break the rules. So I remember that rules are not to stop us having fun; God gave rules to protect little people – poor people, hungry people, sick people, working people, old people, refugees – little people. God gave us rules to remind us to help these little ones; to make sure they know God loves them.

So when we start with the big rules today – the Ten Commandments – maybe we can hear them saying God loves everyone – especially people who need help; people who aren't safe. There are 603 other rules in the Hebrew Bible that started from those ten, and lots of them are about looking after little people. God loves little ones very much. That's really something to think about.

Some people already have. That's why today Psalmist wrote a love-song to the Law. That's why Jesus got so wild when he saw people using the Law wrongly and making the Temple more of a business than a place for people to come and be with God. We'll hear that story last. But now let's listen to the readings.

Ex 20 1-17 Ps 19 1 Cor 1 18-25 Jn 2 13-22

Sermon

The collect prayer of the day: Lord our God, by your Holy Spirit, write your commandments upon our hearts, and grant us the wisdom and power of the cross, so that, cleansed from greed and selfishness, we may become a living temple of your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is a beautiful, rich collect prayer; a string of wisdom's pearls which gathers the themes of today's readings and also threads through other Biblical themes in a remarkable way. It opens with the invocation **Lord our God**. It's a simple but amazing statement that our life with God is one of mutual belonging and trust; and this gives meaning to everything else.

By your Holy Spirit, write your commandments upon our hearts. Linking Holy Spirit and our hearts recalls Rom 8²⁶⁻²⁷ where we learn how the Spirit lives within us, praying for us in those agonising longings which never find words, and that God, who knows the heart's secrets, understands these prayers. (J B Phillips tr.) It's a beautiful picture of how our mutual belonging with God finds expression – it's an utter gift of God.

Here we ask the Holy Spirit to inscribe God's commandments on our hearts; very different from how God's commandments were first given. As we just read, they were first given through Moses to the people of Israel – a written covenant of mutual care. In Ex 31¹⁸ we're told they were written by the finger of God on tablets of stone and given to Moses.

But in our collect prayer this morning, we prayed that God the Holy Spirit might inscribe them not on tablets of stone, but directly onto our hearts. This recalls the *new covenant* in Jer 31, where the Law of God would be inscribed onto the very hearts of the people of Israel.

Can the finger of God touch our hearts? We've just prayed in confidence that this should happen. What will this do for us? Will it ***grant us the wisdom and power of the cross?*** The collect prayer links the touch of God's finger on our hearts with blessings of wisdom and power. Here, it echoes the Psalmist's love-song to God's Law. Psalm 19 celebrates the way God's commandments revive our souls, how they give us wisdom and joy, clear our vision, and purify us, leaving us with the sweetest taste in our mouths – so much more than much fine gold can do for us.

Is that an odd move for you? The Psalmist contrasts the gift of the Law with another standard measure of value, fine gold, which comes off a poor second. Law or gold – relationships or wealth – represent the two sets of values competing for us. Do we begin to hear the distant chink of coins falling from the money-changers' tables here?

Paul gives us a contrast too; wisdom or power. He contrasts the wisdom of the Cross and the other wisdoms it confronts: the empirical proofs of signs, and the idolising of rhetorical prowess and learning. Here, he speaks directly into our time. Our time worships wealth and influence – and those who wield them gag and belittle any challenge to their power. But Paul knows that they don't speak with anything like the power of God's love; the love we encounter uniquely in the Cross of Christ.

So our collect continues – ***Grant us the wisdom and power of the cross, so that, cleansed from greed and selfishness, WE may become A LIVING TEMPLE of your love.*** Cleansed. The collect prayer now links us to the Gospel, where Jesus cleanses the Temple of commerce. Here is the same Law and wealth contrast that we heard in the Psalm. Now we hear the love of God expressed in the crash of falling tables, the lowing, bleating and clattering hooves of startled beasts, and the anguished outcries of Jesus, the sellers of the birds and animals and the outraged money changers.

Cleansing greed and selfishness is a roaring battle which Jesus fights for us and with us. It's an inner battle. And today, we see a dramatic picture of it in his cleansing of the Temple.

We know this, because when the officials ask him what sign he can show them to justify his outrageous behaviour, he tries to teach them that the cleansing *is* the sign. It is a sign of the inner cleansing we all need, so **we** might become **a living temple of God's love** – a worthy temple of the Holy Spirit who we've asked to inscribe God's Law on our hearts. And have you noticed that the collect only mentions one temple? All of us together are the **living temple** – not each of us individually. **We** are his body. And in Jesus' name, in this prayer, we ask God to do this in us.

So let's remember what we've seen Jesus do in the Temple today and ask that he might do it in and for us in this Lenten time of cleansing. Amen