

MARCH 11, 2012: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
Exodus 20:1-17 I Corinthians 1:22-25 John 2:13-15

Unless we understand the biblical concept of "covenant" we'll only skim the surface of today's readings.

A covenant is an agreement - a formal contract - between at least two parties. Each party has specific responsibilities; each has rewards. It's a classic "quid pro quo:" you give me something; I'll give you something. People freely enter into covenants because they believe such agreements will create a better life for them. (Probably the most frequently entered covenant today is marriage.)

Today's first reading provides us with the basic covenant responsibilities of the ancient Jews. In return for following through on these obligations, they become Yahweh's special people and receive all the "goodies" such a relationship guarantees.

Most of us probably learned these ten responsibilities long before we knew the definition of adultery. We often see them posted in our churches. In an abbreviated form, they're framed and displayed in one Catholic school cafeteria in which I teach. Though it's good to keep them, there's just one problem: they're someone else's covenant, not ours! Why would any of you want to hang a framed copy of my college teaching contract on your living room wall? It's my agreement with my employers, not yours.

The very introduction to these ten "words" tells us this covenant wasn't made with us: "I, Yahweh, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery." My ancestors came out of Germany and Belgium, not Egypt. Besides, except for Seventh Day Adventists, Christians haven't kept the "Sabbath" regulation for the last nineteen centuries. And most followers of Jesus have expanded the sixth commandment to encompass much more than just adultery.

As we hear in I Corinthians 11, we Christians are committed to adhere not to the 613 Sinai regulations, but to the responsibilities of the special covenant Jesus made with Yahweh; a covenant which we ratify every time we drink from the Eucharistic cup. We're committed to carry on Jesus' ministry.

In the first chapter of I Corinthians, Paul bemoans the fact that many of the people he attempts to evangelize - both Jews and Gentiles - reject that "new" covenant. They specifically object to its obligation to die with Jesus. "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom," the Apostle writes, "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

John presents us with one aspect of dying with Jesus in today's gospel pericope. The earliest followers of Jesus eventually were forced to choose between their imitation of him and their dedication to "organized religion." Though institutions, like the Jerusalem temple, offered security and unified Jews all over the world, Jewish Christians no longer put them at the center of their lives of faith. Jesus' encounter with the temple's animal dealers and money changers is a classic gospel demonstration of how even well-intentioned religious institutions can be corrupted.

In John's theology, Jesus takes the place of the temple: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up-----He was speaking of the temple of his body." When the evangelist talks about believing "in his name," he's basically saying that people are committing themselves to doing the things he did.

I suspect the reason some Christians still insist on displaying the Ten Commandments revolves around the dying responsibility that's at the heart of Jesus' covenant. It's far easier to commit oneself to keeping just ten regulations than to accept the obligation to constantly give oneself to and for others.

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MARCH 18, 2012: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

II Chronicles 36:14-16,19-23 Ephesians 2:4-10 John 3:14-21

The author of II Chronicles makes certain his readers know why the Chosen People had to go through the horrors the 6th century BCE destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. "Early and often did Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of Yahweh against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy."

The normal biblical way to surface God's will in one's life was to surface and listen to the prophets God embedded in that life. As the late Fr. Bruce Vawter put it, "They are the conscience of the people." Of course, there's always one problem when it comes to prophets: how do you know which are real and which are fake? During the period of the classic Hebrew prophets, every shrine and palace sported its own prophets: people on the priest or king's payroll who spouted their benefactors' agenda.

One safe way of picking out the realies from the fakes is to ask, "Does he or she take me back to the beginnings of my faith? Authentic prophets are always concerned that we remember why our faith came into existence in the first place. They're especially sharp at pointing out how later additions to and subtractions from the practice of our faith have altered the original plan and vision of those who gave us that faith.

The disciple of Paul who wrote Ephesians certainly fulfills that aspect of true prophecy. He wants his community to remember that the salvation they've experienced through Jesus is completely dependent on God's love, not on any "works" of their own. "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ - by grace you have been saved - raised *us* up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus-----"

Because our faith is rooted in God's free gift of salvation, we're expected to spend our lives "paying it forward" to others who don't necessarily merit our help or attention. If we need an example of such a faithful person, we simply have to turn to Jesus.

That's exactly what John does in today's gospel pericope: one of the best known passages in all of Scripture.

The evangelist begins with Jesus speaking about being "lifted up" - a classic example of John's frequent use of double meaning vocabulary. Lifted up can mean exalted or it can refer to crucifixion. Were you to ask the author which meaning he had in mind, I'm certain he'd respond, "Yes!" It's precisely by being lifted up on the cross that Jesus is exalted. Our unique faith began with people who first committed themselves to dying with Jesus, people who quickly discovered they were also being raised with Jesus. They chose to follow the light, not darkness.

One last point about our Chronicles reading. The author - following in the footsteps of Deutero-Isaiah -reminds us that the Babylonian Exile ended only when Cyrus, the Persian emperor, conquered the Babylonians and permitted the Jewish captives to return to the Promised Land. They were liberated not by a faithful Jew, but by an uncircumcised Gentile!

Though I presume lots of law-abiding Jews had problems with this particular mode of salvation, the sacred writer is taking his readers back to beginnings. Because Yahweh created all people, Yahweh can work with and through all people. God's not limited to working only with those with whom God made a covenant.

I wonder if today's prophets are also giving us that same message?

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