

Third Sunday of Lent – B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
7 March 2021

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
(John 3:16) John 2:13-25

Believe in God's Promises and Obey His Commandments

One of the great philosophers of the 20th century, a British Catholic named Elizabeth Anscombe, once wrote: "...we have to fear God and keep his commandments..." Not too controversial of a statement; I think most of us would generally agree with it. What she wrote after that is much more challenging for us, and relevant to us today, as the First Reading has invited us to reflect upon the Ten Commandments:

"...we have to fear God and keep his commandments, and calculate what is for the best only within the limits of that obedience, knowing that the future is in God's power and that no one can snatch away those whom the Father has given to Christ."¹

Anscombe wrote this in 1961 in an essay in which she argued against nuclear and other types of massively destructive warfare. I read an article referencing her work this week.² Although the article was about the morality of warfare, I immediately saw that the principle of following God's commandments when discerning a global issue, is also applicable to each of us individually, as we sort out and discern the decisions of our personal life.

+++

As we heard the Ten Commandments read from the Book of Exodus, I think we recognized many—if not all—of them. (Were there any surprises for anyone?) And, even someone who is not part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, probably has some familiarity with the Ten Commandments. Part of why they are well-known and remembered—even by people of other religions or people of no religion—is that they resonate with the human heart. The Ten Commandments are the foundation for Divine Law. They were written by the finger of God

onto the stone tablets given to Moses, but they have also been written in each of our hearts by God who created us.³

+++

The challenge that Anscombe posed to the leaders of militaries is important for us as a human family to consider: How do we expect our nation and the nations of the world to apply God's commandments? But it might also seem somewhat abstract for those of us who don't have direct responsibility for or authority over the actions of an army.

However, we do have responsibility for our own actions. And, Anscombe's challenge is important for us to consider in our personal life. How am I doing in following God's Commandments? Do I take them seriously? Do I consider them as Ten *Commandments*? Or do I consider them as Ten *Suggestions*?

Do I see them as just one part of a calculation for my day-to-day life; one factor among many to consider as I make choices in my actions? Or, do I see them for what they truly are: boundaries that keep me safely within God's holy will? Do I see them as the opportunity that God has set before me to turn away from death and choose the way of life?⁴

+++

Any time of year is the perfect time to choose to follow God, His Commandments, and His Ways. But, Lent is a particularly fitting time. Reviewing the Ten Commandments is a good way to make an examination of conscience and prepare for a good confession.

The first three cover our relationship with God:

- Do I put other things before God, such as: sports, school, work, technology, possessions, money, entertainment? Do I bow my head before a screen more often than I do before God?
- Do I have reverence for God and spend time in prayer and growing my relationship with Him?
- Do I observe and keep holy the Sabbath?

The remaining seven cover our relationship with other people:

- Do I respect my parents?
- Do I get angry at others, yell at them, or fight with them often? Do I hold grudges?
- Do I pursue chastity, either within my marriage or as a single person?
- Do I take what's not mine, more than my share, or refuse to share with others?
- Do I harm other people with gossip, bullying, or name-calling?

+++

This is just a brief opportunity for a Lenten examination of conscience. I encourage you to follow it up with a good confession, if you are able. We have Confessions offered every Friday of Lent here in the Church from 4:30-5:30 p.m. Also, look in parish communications for additional times to be offered later in Lent. You can also make an appointment with me, if you send me a message. And, if for health reasons you are not able to come to the Church for Confession right now, please still do this examination of conscience and make a sincere Act of Contrition, trusting in God's Mercy until you are able to come to Confession in person.

+++

Following the Ten Commandments, taking them seriously as the Word of God, and correcting any areas that we've strayed from them is critical for us as disciples of Jesus Christ. God has made a promise to us that, if we choose to follow His Commandments, He will lead us safely to eternal life.⁵ Our faith in God is revealed when we choose to—or choose *not* to—follow His Commandments.

Not that we have to be perfect in order to be faithful. None of us is perfect at following all the Commandments, and there are certain ones that each of us struggles with. However, we must avoid becoming complacent in our efforts to follow God's Commandments. We see in today's Gospel that, when Jesus finds us complacent, He loves us too much to leave us that way. He is zealous for us, and He will come into our lives turning things over, trying to wake us up.⁶

God has given us the words of everlasting life.⁷ We are called to look for the ways that we have not been *listening*; the ways that we have not been *obeying*. And then, to not be complacent, but to take it seriously that we need to be forgiven, healed, and corrected by Jesus. We are called to take it seriously that God has promised to us that following His Commandments is the way to eternal life. And that choosing another way is choosing sin and death.⁸ There is no other way to redemption and life except through following God's Commandments.

We began Lent on Ash Wednesday with these words: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." Repent of our sins and believe the *Good News* that all of our sins can be forgiven when we confess them, that we are redeemed, and that Jesus promises to lead us to eternal life.

If, however, we become complacent, and don't take the time and effort to keep getting better at following God's Commandments and following Jesus' Way, then, as Anscombe wrote in the conclusion of her essay, we "must be prepared to say to God: '[I] could not obey your commandments, for [I] did not believe your promises.'"⁹

¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, "War and Murder" in *Nuclear Weapons: a Catholic Response*, edited by Walter Stein (1961), 43-62

² John Schwenkler and Mark Souva, "False Choices: The unjustifiable bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" in *Commonweal*, Vol. 147, No. 11, Dec 2020, pp. 10-12

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*

1956: "The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men."

1958: "The natural law is immutable and permanent throughout the variations of history (*Gaudium et Spes* 10); it subsists under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress. The rules that express it remain substantially valid. Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man."

1962: "The Old Law is the first stage of revealed Law. Its moral prescriptions are summed up in the Ten Commandments. The precepts of the Decalogue lay the foundations for the vocation of man fashioned in the image of God; they prohibit what is contrary to the love of God and neighbor and prescribe what is essential to it. The Decalogue is a light offered to the conscience of every man to make God's call and ways known to him and to protect him against evil: 'God wrote on the tables of the Law what men did not read in their hearts' (St. Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 58:1)

1981: "The Law of Moses contains many truths naturally accessible to reason. God has revealed them because men did not read them in their hearts."

Also, see Hebrews 8:10: "But this is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts."

⁴ See Deuteronomy 30:15-20: "See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I am giving you today..."

⁵ See Deuteronomy 30:19-20: “I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land which the LORD swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.”

⁶ John 2:15-17: “He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.’ His disciples recalled the words of scripture, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

⁷ Psalm Refrain from today’s Mass (John 6:68c): “Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.”

⁸ See Deuteronomy 30:17-18: “If, however, your heart turns away and you do not obey, but are led astray and bow down to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.”

⁹ Anscombe