

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent 2021



The Young Christian Workers (YCW) and others have taken for their rough guide to a life of faith, See, Judge, Act. But to be able to do this you have to be free. If you cannot be physically free, and many in our world can't, then free spiritually, free within. But there are things that prevent us taking on this freedom. One is our reluctance to take responsibility. We might be very good at taking responsibility in our workplace or home, but responsibility for our faith is often another thing.

The actual event of the Exodus in the Old Testament, the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt, is the most important occurrence in the whole set of books. (Portrayed graphically by Cecil B. DeMille in 1956 in the originally named film, 'The Ten Commandments', again with Charlton Heston.) For Jews the Exodus stands alone, for Christians it looks forward to Jesus' liberating us from sin. So at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of our liberation, one of the Old Testament readings we have to read is the hymn of liberation sung after they have crossed the Red Sea. This prepares us for the Resurrection of Christ, our gateway to freedom.

Today's first reading is what we know as The Ten Commandments, the charter for Israel's freedom and life as a new independent nation, as the Americans would say, 'under God.' You can see this in many Anglican churches behind the altar, (and in Cheltenham, somewhat uncomfortably, behind the pizza oven in a converted church.) But what is often left out is the most important line, the first, 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.' Without that none of the rest stand. Without the freedom to live by this new way of life, the commandments of God mean nothing, the people would go back to living under Pharaoh's commandments. But taking responsibility for

their own lives as opposed to being slaves is not easy. Once they get into the wilderness they repeatedly shout at Moses, “Why did you bring us here, in slavery we had food and gardens, plenty to eat? It was a better life.” Which is all very human, but without accepting the problems of freedom they are not free to act in their own lives, not free to live their own covenant with God.

Something similar happens in the gospel too. Here the challenge to their freedom is different. This time freedom is dampened by acceptance of ‘This is the way it has always been done.’ The Temple is where God is present to his people on earth for the Jews. But over the years lines of demarcation, rituals and cost have excluded too many. But they all accept this, these traditions. Often set up at first for good reasons but now hardened into a way of life accepted by all. So you had to buy your sacrifice, had to walk to Jerusalem, change the commonly used money. Anyone with a disability could only enter so far, the same for women. The rich had pride of place and gave resounding donations they threw into echoing bronze trumpets that rang out their donation, as compared to the widow’s mite. All this was accepted and regulated as the way to God.

Again your personal encounter with God had become clouded, hidden, by layers of rules that were formulaic and exclusive. The ‘see’ part of see, judge, act, was blurred by human regulation.

So Jesus comes racing into the Temple, knowing that the businessmen, the money-changers, were all there by custom, accepted by the priests, doing a job that helped the people in what they needed to sacrifice, in a sense it was not their fault (though obviously profiting by it at others expense). What Jesus has to do, to free people to see clearly, to take responsibility for their faith and not rely on formulas, is to clear the way, unfog their sight, from what blinds them, and help them see God and approach God without burdens, as Jesus says ‘laid on them by the leaders’.

All through John’s gospel Jesus is stressing the joy of knowing God directly. He says to the woman at the well, soon you will not

need to worship on Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem but will worship in spirit and truth. There is a freedom here that is open to everyone.

Dramatically, and heretically, he says to the people, destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up again. We know Jesus was talking about himself as the disciples came to, and Jesus had nothing against the Temple.

But he was leading here into what the whole gospel is to be about, and this is why John moves this to the beginning of his gospel. The Temple represented where God was present to his people. But now it is in Christ, he is the head and we are the body. As St. Paul says, our bodies have become temples of the Holy Spirit. It is within us that we meet Christ now.

Freedom to see, judge and act in faith comes from the realisation that Christ lives in us and we in him. For this we have to take responsibility for our own encounter with God, and welcome the joy of it. It might seem odd for a Catholic priest to object to ritual as we have more of it than many a Christian church. But as Catholics we have to see that the only purpose for our sacraments is to meet God there and if people are excluded we have to think carefully about that.

Lent is a time for clarifying our sight, clearing away the fog that might lie between us and God