

3rd Sunday of Lent - B
Exodus 20:1-17;
I Corinthians 1:22-25;
John 2:13-14
Little Flower - 3/8/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

The covenants with Noah and Abraham were preliminaries to God's covenant with Israel. Today's reading from Exodus recounts part of the story of the establishment God's covenant with Israel. God's Covenant with Israel was the first true biblical covenant, i.e., the first bilateral covenant.

As the initiator of the covenants, God determined the conditions of the covenant. For his part, God promised the Israelites that if they entered into covenant with him, he would make them his "*special possession, dearer to [him] than all other people...a kingdom of priests, a holy nation*" [Exodus 19:5-6]. He also promised to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, what we refer to as the Promised Land. For their part, they had to keep the Ten Commandments. God did not impose the Ten Commandments on the people. Rather, the people freely accepted them as their part of the covenant with God.

When God offered the Israelites the covenant, he promised a lot to them but also asked a lot from them. Therefore, the Ten Commandments begin with what is called the historical prologue to the covenant: "*I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.*" In other words, promising a lot and asking a lot, God reminded them of what he had already done for them, i.e., freeing them from slavery in Egypt, thereby demonstrating that he could deliver on his promises.

Three of the Ten Commandments referred to God and seven to others. Keeping the Ten Commandments did not make a person holy or even good. Rather, they represented the outer boundaries of the covenant. Those who violated them placed themselves outside the covenant. Eight of the ten are negatives: "You shall not..." In the New Testament, Jesus would embrace and go beyond them in the two great commandments of the New Covenant: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*" The second is this: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" [Mark 12:30-31].

Underlying each of the commandments is a value. Today I would like to focus briefly on the first commandment: "*You shall not have other gods besides me.*" The first commandment has to do with priorities. Mythologist Joseph Campbell once said that we can tell what was most important to people by their buildings. In the Middle Ages, cathedrals were the tallest buildings, demonstrating the importance of God to them. In the 18th century, political palaces were the tallest buildings. In the 20th century, the tallest buildings were office buildings, especially financial centers. He said this in 1988. In the 21st century, I would suggest that in most major cities, sports palaces are the most elaborate buildings. If our society has an idol, it is sports.

The question we have to ask ourselves is what do we put before God. To make our question concrete, we can ask ourselves what do we put before Sunday Mass. The reality is that our society as a whole and many individuals put sports before God. For example, how many people miss Sunday Mass or permit their children to miss Sunday Mass because of professional sports or youth sports? How many of us have more sports memorabilia in our homes than Christian symbols? Please do not misunderstand me. Sports can be great fun to watch and great to play. This becomes an issue only when we give sports greater priority than we give God.

My brothers and sisters, the question we all have to ask ourselves is where does God fit into our priorities. I would suggest that if we make God our first priority, all our other priorities will fall into place. People often say about others, "He or she needs to get his or her priorities straight." If we do not put God first, we will never have our priorities straight. Therefore, as an exercise, I would suggest that this week we list and then rank our priorities and see where God ends up.