

28th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "B"
October 10-11, 2015/ Cathedral of St. Paul
Readings: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10: 17-30

"Ten words, the Decalogue, the ten commandments, the Law"; by whatever name, this list of ten has held a sacred place in Jewish and Christian tradition unrivalled by any other list known to humanity. Jesus himself gave the importance of this list when he spoke to the rich young man in today's Gospel. He specifically referred to the commandments without listing all of them. They were simply called the commandments.

Now it is true that the Jews had more laws than simply this list. In fact, the Jews had a total of 623 laws; yet, this list retains its status as being pre-eminent. It is particularly interesting that Jesus tells the rich young man that what he must do in order to inherit eternal life is to follow the commandments. What he is really saying to the young man is to follow him. If you follow Christ, that entails keeping the commandments.

It is precisely because of the manner in which the Ten Commandments were transmitted, literally being from the mouth of God that they hold such a pre-eminence. God said, "You shall have no other Gods before me," and so on. Even in the Old Testament itself, the "ten words" are referred to with reverence. They summarize in such a succinct and wonderful manner how first loved us, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." People who see it as a set of "Dont's" completely miss the point. God is calling us to faithfulness in order to be more like Him.

The commandments only take on their full meaning in the context of the Covenant between God and humanity. Our moral life has all its meaning in and through the covenant. The commandments reflect the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant.

Yet, here we see the young man walking away sad- we are told it is because he had many possessions. But look at it another way. Replace the wealth with something else and ask yourself this question: “Is there anything that I would not give up in order to follow Jesus?” “What is the one thing that would stop me in my tracks while following Him?” Or tougher yet, “Is there anything that could happen to you such that you might lose your trust in God?” A death perhaps, the loss of a job, a failed relationship?

It is far better to think of the Ten Commandments as God’s personal invitation to each of us for a closer union with him. God states all the obligations in the first person to the first person, “you” singular, from first person to first person.

Do you remember seeing the bumper sticker saying “Question Authority”? This sticker amuses me more than it makes me angry, because I want to reply to them, “Why should I? Says who?” Most likely these people are not in a position in which to exercise authority. It would be a rude awakening.

Can authority be abused? Absolutely. Has it happened? Undoubtedly. Still for some people, the Ten Commandments have become mere suggestions. They reject the notion of anyone having authority over them. In point of fact, we bow in homage before the God who gave us these commandments, for they are such an awesome gift as well as a tremendous responsibility. We do not have the power to complete the task ourselves. We are doomed to failure if we try. We can’t do it, and that acknowledgement itself is a humbling and necessary experience.

Our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews notes that God’s word is sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow. God’s word stings sometimes. The road map to heaven is fraught with dangers and obstacles.

The Catechism teaches:

Since they express man's fundamental duties towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, *grave* obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. God engraves the Ten Commandments in the human heart.¹

The Decalogue forms a coherent whole. Each "word" refers to each of the others and to all of them; they reciprocally condition one another. The two tablets shed light on one another. Traditionally, the first tablet has #1-3, while the second contains #4-10. The first three deal most directly with God. Love God first, then your neighbor. How could one honor father and mother, without giving praise to him who created mother and father? How could we grasp what it means to honor, unless we first see that honor is first given to God and derivatively to a human being? How could we say that we love God, without loving our fellow man, His creatures?

The Decalogue has been around for 3350 years. If we only listened to them, and put them into practice, calling upon God's grace for help. It sounds so simple, but then God's plan is simple. What was one of the first questions of *Baltimore Catechism*?

Why did God make you?

To know love and serve him in this life and be happy with him forever in the next. A generation ago, every second grader knew as much. Sometimes our earliest lessons are our best.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2072.