

3rd Sunday Lent B
March 3-4, 2018

Whither the Ten Commandments?

Readings: Ex 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17; 1 Cor. 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

The scene depicting Charlton Heston as Moses in Cecile B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* is an all-time classic. Returning from Mount Sinai, he encounters divisions: "We will not live by your commandments...we are free!" The mutiny continues: "He shows you no land flowing with milk and honey...I show you a god of Gold!" Next to the man is a molten calf, an idol. Heston delivers a powerful reply, reinforcing the need to keep the commandments, all while dramatically smashing the tablets to the ground. "Those who will not live by the Law will die by the Law."

In one of the greatest public acts of arrogance I have witnessed in all my years as a priest, I recall when on the eve of Pope John Paul II's last visit to the USA in 1999, a billionaire media magnate opined that it is time to change the outdated Ten Commandments, saying that if he met the Holy Father, he would tell him to "Get with it. Welcome to the 20th century." Calling the Ten Commandments obsolete, he said: "If you're only going to have 10 rules, I don't know if [banning] adultery should be one of them."

All hubris aside, this may be said with certainty. The media mogul was and is not alone in his views; many believe that the Ten Commandments are outdated because they believe themselves to be arbiters of their own morality, the same problem that plagued Adam and Eve. We will never get away from these views completely.

At the U.S. Supreme Court, a seated Moses is shown holding the two tablets of the law as the central figure of the east pediment on the exterior of the Supreme Court building. The Ten Commandments are on the front Bronze Doors, on the wooden interior doors, and in a frieze over the bench itself. The word "Decalogue" means literally "ten words." Whether formulated as negative commandments, prohibitions, or as positive precepts such as: "Honor your father and mother," or "Remember to

keep holy the Sabbath,” the Decalogue points out the conditions of a life freed from the slavery of sin. (cf. CCC 2057)

The Commandments take on their full meaning within the covenant. Apart from this covenant relationship, they can appear to be merely a set of rules. Instead, the Lord speaks in the first person, “I am the Lord.” The words are addressed to another personal subject, “you,” once again showing forth a relationship. And this ‘you’ is in the singular...you, personally, not even collectively.

The numbering of the Commandments has varied in the course of history. The original Hebrew doesn't help, as the commandments are not numbered in the manuscripts. Catholics follow the division of the Commandments established by St. Augustine, as do the Lutheran confessions. The Greek Fathers worked out a slightly different numbering, which is found in the Orthodox Churches and Reformed communities.

Consider the Council of Trent’s teaching on the place of the Ten Commandments:

If anyone shall say that a man who is justified and ever so perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God and the Church, but only to believe, as if indeed the Gospel were a mere absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of observation of the commandments: let him be anathema.¹

The Ten Commandments are absolutely binding upon us, and will be for as long as we are on this earth. God implanted in man the precepts of the natural law. He has given us the commandments to remind us of our fundamental obligations. We, like those who fashioned the molten calf in Sinai, have chipped away at the foundation of our society, and we see it crumbling beneath our feet!

¹ Council of Trent (1547): DS 1569-70

[One modern popular self-help guru Deepak Chopra speaks now of Ten Commitments instead of Ten Commandments, in his characteristic mixture of Eastern & Western thought, the latest spin on traditional morality.]

James Madison, the 4th President of the United States is attributed with saying: “We stake the future of this country on our ability to govern ourselves under the principles of the Ten Commandments.”

Let us proclaim without fear that our true freedom, far from being hindered by Law, is in fact discovered and deepened by means of its observance.