

The Path of "Foolishness"

March 4, 2018 – Third Sunday of Lent

By Matthew Ramage

Readings: Exodus 20.1-17; 1 Corinthians 1.22-25; John 2.13-25

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing our soul. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. These words from today's responsorial psalm may prove a source of great consolation for many of us, confirming our experience that God's holy law is life-giving, and that without it our lives would be adrift in a sea of confusion. Yet this reality is far from obvious to many Catholics sitting in the pews on any given Sunday.

How many would say that the Church's laws are a major source of joy and refreshment in their lives? Would not a fair number of us rather view these same laws as burdens? A homily on this theme in light of today's readings can serve as a helpful corrective to this prevalent view among the faithful in the Church.

The Ten Commandments

Today's first reading recounting the revelation of the Ten Commandments is quite familiar. We all memorized these precepts at one time or another, most of us in our childhood, in preparation for receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. Something we may have missed in our youth – or even if we did not miss it, it constantly needs to be called back to mind – is that the presentation of the commandments does not actually begin with a "You shall not." Instead, the first words out of God's mouth are "I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery." The importance of this introductory formula is that it grounds the entire Decalogue in the nature of God himself. As Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs has explained, all that Yahweh wishes to reveal to his people is at bottom an expression and development of the fundamental truth, "I am Yahweh."

The Ten Commandments, then, are best understood not as mere prohibitions but rather as means to deepen our relationship with God. If Israel really knows the Lord, she will want to love him. She will grasp the inner intelligibility of his laws. If, on the other hand, the people do not recognize the true nature of God's covenantal love for them, then his laws will appear arbitrary and stifling.

The application of this reality in the life of the Church today is not difficult to see. If we can help Catholics to understand that the very nature of God is love (1 Jn 4.16), then we can begin to articulate for them how each of the Church's laws – even those that prove most controversial today – are actually an expression of God's love for us, and indeed an expression of God's nature itself. As the Dominican Fr. Servais Pinckaers puts it, many today tend to have a "morality of obligation" wherein we view exterior constraints, and Church teaching in particular, as forces that detract from our fulfillment. Accordingly, part of the New Evangelization consists in making the effort to show that the moral truths of the Church are given to make us free and happy – to foster in souls what Pinckaers calls a "morality of happiness."

Our Happiness

Of course, it is completely countercultural these days to affirm the Church's precepts as true, beautiful, and constitutive of human happiness. This is where today's second reading comes into play. The crucified Jesus was a "stumbling block" to many Jews of his day, who did not expect a crucified Messiah. It was also "foolishness" to the Gentiles, whose "wisdom" had no place for crucifixion or resurrection (1 Cor 1.23).

Today, too, the way of the cross remains foolishness in the eyes of the world. Why on earth would a person want to forsake real human pleasures just because a bunch of old men in Rome say "no" to them? Why would we consent to "put to death the deeds of the body" (Rom 8.13) when our body seems to be crying out for satisfaction? To the person who does not make the effort to cultivate a profound relationship with God, there appears very little that can be said in response to the above questions. But the person who knows the Lord and believes in his everlasting covenantal love for us perceives the deep wisdom undergirding the Church's negative prohibitions.

The wisdom of the world is blind to the all-important truth that saying "no" to certain human goods is in reality precisely what frees a person to be happy. In reality, our relationship with Christ is one big "yes," but it is a "yes" that can be had only if we are willing sometimes to say "no" to certain finite things that pale in comparison with knowing the love of Christ our Lord (Phil 3.8).

Sometimes this "yes" to the path of Christian discipleship requires that we perform actions that directly challenge the spirit of our age. In today's gospel we find Jesus modeling for us precisely this sort of bold behavior. Having crafted a whip of cords, he drove the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple precincts. The people ask him for a "sign" to justify his doing this, which in turn recalls the "signs" demanded by Jews in today's second reading. The only sign Jesus offers them at this point is the destruction of the Temple – by which he cryptically means the temple of his own body. This prophecy of the crucifixion is immediately misunderstood by the Jewish people here, just as it was misunderstood by the disciples even until the end of Jesus' ministry (cf. Mt 16.21-23).

Today, too, we have our own way of trying to forbid Jesus from taking up his cross. Of course, the historical crucifixion of Jesus was a one-time event, but we continually attempt to stop him from taking up his cross *in us*. If Christians are to become by grace what Christ is by nature, then we have to follow his path completely, both in life and in death. In brief, if we want Christ to live in us, then we must consent to being crucified with him (Gal 2.20). Do we have the courage to travel against the current of our day, to tread the path of what many will deem "foolishness," with faith that on the other side of the cross lies resurrection and the bliss of eternal life? How, concretely, is God calling us this day or this week to embark on this path of "foolishness"?

Old Testament Context

A final note on the subject of today's gospel, related to its Old Testament context, which is not recalled directly in our readings. Although the Jewish people were not as a whole expecting a crucified Messiah, the Old Testament text cited by Jesus in John's gospel ("Zeal for your house will consume me") does in fact point in that direction, if we read a little between the lines. In fact, the gospel authors want us to do precisely this: to consider not just the verse itself cited but moreover the *context* in which it originally appeared.

It turns out that these famous words of Jesus reported in John 2.17 are a citation of Psalm 69.9. Going back and reading the entire Old Testament text referenced here by St. John, one discovers that the psalmist was not just zealous but also persecuted because of his zeal. He bears reproach for God's sake (Ps 69.7) and is hated by people with no cause (Ps 69.4). In a poignant text that points to Jesus' crucifixion centuries later, the psalmist even adds, "They gave me gall for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (Ps 69.21).

In his context, then, we rightly understand John's citation of the verse to the effect that zeal for God's house consumed Jesus. His audience does not see it right away, but Jesus himself knows he will eventually be persecuted and killed for his zeal. Yet he remains zealous anyway, confident that his Father will ultimately deliver him from his

oppressors in accordance with his all-surpassing wisdom. In today's liturgy, we too are being called to embrace our loving Father with confidence in his power to deliver us from all evil.

Our willingness to say "yes" to the way of the cross will indeed require that we follow the Church's commandments. It will indeed demand that we say "no" to some true human goods, to leave behind real creature comforts in order to purchase the pearl of great price. But the courage to be a fool for God's sake also comes with a great reward: an enduring happiness that the wisdom of this world cannot begin to fathom.

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For Further Reading

Junno Arocho, ["Benedict XVI: 10 Commandments Are a Sign of God's Love for Us,"](#) *Zenit* (September 10, 2012)

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##2052-2082](#)

Michael R. Heinlein, ["The Ten Commandments,"](#) *OSV Newsweekly* (March 16, 2017)

Hans Urs von Balthasar, ["The Cross – For Us"](#)

In Short . . .

- ***Many of us have a "morality of obligation" that sees constraints like Church teaching as forces that detract from our fulfillment.***
- ***However, the moral truths of the Church are given to make us free and happy – to foster in our souls a "morality of happiness."***
- ***Jesus' cross did not make sense to Jews and Gentiles of his day, and it continues to confound us now.***
- ***The wisdom of the world is blind to the all-important truth that saying "no" to certain human goods is precisely what frees a person to be happy.***
- ***Our relationship with Christ is one big "yes" that can be had only if we are willing to say "no" to certain finite things that pale in comparison with knowing the love of Christ.***
- ***The courage to be a fool for God's sake comes with a great reward: an enduring happiness that the wisdom of this world cannot begin to fathom.***

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