

3rd Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
John 2:13-25
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Our first reading is a list of commandments -- a set of instructions for living a good life. It isn't the only such list. If we combed the religious and secular literatures of the world, we would find innumerable guides to the good life -- catalogs of right and wrong.

I can imagine a religious education lesson for schools. (I'm making this up, but you know the kind of thing I mean.) The student is presented with the Ten Commandments. On the same page are printed the moral codes of other world religions -- and maybe, for good measure, a list of ethical precepts from someone like John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, or George Bernard Shaw. The student is instructed: "Compare these guides to the moral life. Which commandments do you think are most important? Why? Now make your own set of commandments. Give reasons for each commandment that you choose."

The lists that resulted from this exercise would doubtless look a lot like our reading from Exodus. And considered subjectively, as blueprints for an ethical existence, there would probably be little to choose between them. One would be pretty much as good as another. That is, looked at *subjectively*. The claim of the Ten Commandments to *special* status is rooted in the *first lines* from our reading from Exodus: the lines that assure us that "God delivered all these commandments -- the *Lord* your God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt." If that is true, and we

affirm in faith that it is, then this is not just another list. It is, on the contrary, a gift of the *living God*, who has the words of everlasting life. We can say of it everything that our Responsorial Psalm says of the Law of the Lord: It is true. It is just. It is precious. It is perfect. It is wisdom to the simple, rejoicing the heart and refreshing the soul.

Many assume that the Church's moral teaching is arbitrary - that the Church makes arcane rules just for the pleasure of watching people jump through hoops. But Catholics know that the Church's teaching is not just another catalog of do's and don'ts. It is an operating manual for the world -- a manual that has been issued by the Manufacturer. It reflects the way the world really is -- the way it works. If we follow the instructions, we will get maximum satisfaction during our stay here. If we ignore them, we are likely to get some nasty shocks.

Even from a secular perspective, the Church's teaching is the distillation of 2,000 years of human experience. It is the wisdom accumulated in the course of 2,000 years of human striving after happiness. If we include the Old Testament, we can add a few millennia to that number. And while the externals of human life have changed profoundly during that time, even a cursory reading of Shakespeare, or the *Iliad*, or *Exodus*, or *The Epic of Gilgamesh* for that matter, will make it clear that human beings themselves remain essentially unchanged.

Christians read the Old Testament in the light of *Christ*. As St. Paul proclaims, "We preach Christ crucified. To those who are called, Christ is the *power of God* and the *wisdom of God*. For God's folly is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is more powerful than the greatest among us." If human wisdom were sufficient for our salvation, Christ need never have come.

We adopt Our Lord's life as a pattern for our own. He shows us the way to live, and the way to eternal life. The mystery of his Cross overthrows every conventional wisdom. This absurdity to the gentiles is our only path to truth. But again, looked at *subjectively*, the life of Christ is just another heroic, virtuous life. There have been other lives worthy of emulation. Christ's claim to special status rests not just on what he did, but upon who he *is*. In our Gospel, John remarks that Jesus needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what is in the human heart. John is not referring to *human* knowledge. He is not merely saying that Jesus is a very perceptive person. Jesus' insight is the very Wisdom of God, possessed by God's incarnate Son -- the Word of God, who speaks the words of everlasting life.