

Lent 3 / March 3, 2024

Exodus 20:1-2

“And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’”

Love the Lord and your neighbour.

Our text this morning is the culmination of events that began centuries earlier with the patriarch Israel and his children finding refuge in Egypt, during a famine. In gratitude for the service of Israel’s son Joseph, Pharaoh welcomed Israel and his children and gave them the best of the land in which to live. However, in the centuries that followed, their place of refuge became a prison. Fearful of them turning against them, later kings controlled their numbers and made them their slaves. Truly, these events began long before that. They began when God promised Israel’s ancestor Abraham, a son by his wife Sarah, through whom He would create a people, by whom He would bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth. The people who stood in the presence of the Lord at the foot of Mount Sinai to hear the words of the Lord, were the fruits of God’s promise to Abraham, the children of Israel.

The Lord introduced Himself to Abraham as “God Almighty.” He made covenant with him and showed His almighty power by giving him and Sarah a son in their great old age. Is anything too difficult for the Almighty God? Clearly nothing is impossible for the Lord. Abraham was so convinced that he was prepared to offer his son Issac in faith that the Lord would provide. The Lord gave the greatest display of His almighty power by bringing Abraham’s descendants, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of slavery. Now the children of Israel, a multitude as numerous as the stars of the night sky, stood in the presence of the Lord at the foot of Mount Sinai to hear His words.

He introduced Himself to the children of Israel as the Lord who brought them out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery. He made covenant with them and made them His people. He empowered them with His Spirit, so they would love each other as sisters and brothers and love Him as their God. God’s purpose in promising Abraham and making Israel His people was that through them, He would begin again to have a family relationship with human beings. God’s purpose in creating Israel was that through them He would send His Son who through His life, suffering and death, would create a new relationship between Himself and all who receive Him in faith. In this relationship of faith, God empowers us with His Spirit so we may begin to love one another as sisters and brother and to love Him as our God and Father.

The words He spoke are what we have come to know as the ‘Ten Commandments.’ The commandments are in two tables. One dealing with our relationship with God. Three commandments. The second dealing with our relationships with other people. Seven commandments. Although we call them commandments, Moses simply calls them words. The first three words show us how-to live-in relationship with God. We love God by having no other gods but Him and worshipping Him alone. We love God by using His name with respect, calling His name in time of trouble, offering Him our prayers, praises and thanksgivings. We love God by honouring His word, believing it whole heartedly, speaking it truthfully, setting apart a day and times for worship, study, prayers and meditation. These words are summarized in the phrase, “Love the Lord your God.”

Perhaps because we are more difficult to get along with, the second table has seven words showing us how-to live-in relationship with each other. We love one another as sisters and brothers by honouring our parents and those who have responsibility for our wellbeing, honouring marriage and respecting each others marriages. We love one another as God’s people by respecting each others property, reputations, and by respecting their relationships with other people. Elsewhere they are spoken of as commandments, but rather than words telling God’s people what they must do, as we commonly understand commandments, they are words empowering us to live as God’s people. They can be summarized in the phrase, “Love your neighbour.” Israel did not have to do this to become God’s people. God empowers us to do this because He has made us His people.

We call them commandments, but they really are empowerments. The Lord who redeemed us from slavery to sin, bondage to the world, the devil and the condemnation of death and made us His people in the blood of Christ shed for our forgiveness, now empowers us to live with Him and each other in love. In Colossians chapter one St. Paul writes of God saying, “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” In Christ, God rescued us from a spiritual bondage greater than any human house of slavery. In Christ, God redeemed us from a spiritual

death worse than any death of the body. He redeemed us from the control of sin, the power of the devil and the condemnation of eternal death. He redeemed us, so we would live in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Israel was powerless to serve God when they were enslaved to the Egyptians. The Lord set them free from the Egyptians and their gods so they could serve Him as their Lord and God. We were powerless to serve God when we were enslaved to the devil and to sin that leads to death. We make ourselves powerless when we surrender to the ways of the world and the desires of the sinful flesh. In Christ we have been set free from the demands and compulsions of sin that lead to death. The Lord who delivered the children of Israel from the dominion of the Egyptians and slavery leading to death has delivered us from the dominion of sin, the devil and death, so we may live with Him and each other in the glorious freedom of the children of God. He empowers us to love one another as sisters and brothers and to love Him as our Lord and God.

In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul speaks of the covenant God has entered into with us through baptism. He asks if we who have been redeemed from bondage to sin, the devil and death should willingly submit to those things again. How could we want to turn away from the freedom and empowerment of the gospel to the demands of sin that lead to death. In Christ we are empowered to live in the glorious freedom of the children of God. He writes, "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death (death to sin and its desires), in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (according to the guidance of the Spirit)." We are empowered by the Spirit of Jesus to walk in newness of life, loving one another as sisters and brothers and loving the Lord as our God.

In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul spoke about the law, its use and its misuse. We misuse the law when we use it to establish ourselves in a good relationship with God. God established Israel in a good relationship with Himself before He gave them the law. God establishes us in a good relationship with Himself for the sake of His love in Christ Jesus who died for our forgiveness. In Christ we know God as loving Father. Through Him we are children of God. We use the law properly when we use it as a guide by which the Spirit leads us in paths of righteousness in response to His love. We love God and one another, because God loved us first. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" Love is the essence of the commandments. Love is the fulfilment of the law.

In its negative sense, law is a restraint on the godless, so they don't exceed the bounds of sanity and cause total destruction. In 1 Timothy Paul writes, "The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murders..." The law restrains them by showing them their sin and threatening them with punishment. For those who have been redeemed from sin, the devil and death, the law is the path of freedom along which God empowers to walk in newness of life. Those who have been redeemed from the devil, sin and death are not under the threat of the law and the condemnation of death, but under grace. Those who have been redeemed from slavery to sin leading to death are empowered by the Holy Spirit to resist sin and its desires. Those who have been made children of God by the blood of Jesus sealed in the covenant of Holy Baptism, have passed from death to life. We live in the freedom of the Lord, empowered by His Spirit to love Him as our God and Saviour and to worship Him by loving one another as sisters and brothers, deeply and from the heart.

May the Lord who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ. In His name. Amen.