

Our readings today place a serious question before us that is best expressed by asking ourselves: “Who is the God we worship?” or “Who or what is the most fundamental focus of our attention?”

We are faced with that question in our first reading where we listened to the proclamation of the 10 Commandments, and to put that into context I’d like you to listen to a Jewish story. One day a man wanting to live a good life came to his Rabbi to seek his advice. The Rabbi congratulated him on his ambition and asked: “How are you faring this far?” “Quite well,” came the reply. Whereupon the Rabbi asked: “When you say well, what do you mean?”

“I haven’t broken any of the Commandments”, the man replied. “I haven’t taken the Lord’s Name in vain. I haven’t profaned the Sabbath. I haven’t dishonoured my father or mother. I haven’t killed anyone. I haven’t been unfaithful to my wife. I haven’t stolen, I haven’t borne false witness against anyone. And I haven’t coveted my neighbour’s wife or his goods.”

“I see”, said the Rabbi. “So you haven’t broken any of the Commandments?” “That’s right”, the man replied with some pride. “But have you **kept** the Commandments?” the Rabbi asked. “What do you mean?” the man said.

“I mean, have you honoured God’s Holy Name? Have you kept **holy** the Sabbath? Have you loved and honoured your parents? Have you sought to preserve and defend life? When last did you tell your wife you loved her? Have you shared your goods with the poor? Have you defended your neighbour’s good name? When did you last put yourself out to help a neighbour?”

The man was taken aback, but to his credit he went away and reflected on what the Rabbi had said. He realised that up to this he had been merely intent on avoiding wrong-doing, but the Rabbi had offered him a new vision of goodness, - not merely to avoid evil, but to do good. The Rabbi had offered him a new and better compass to guide him, a new and more challenging path to follow. And the same goes for us: We keep the commandments not so that God may love us; we keep the commandments **because** God’s love us is already dwelling within us.

Our Gospel puts that in a different but complementary way. Entering the Temple, the principal place of worship for the Jews, Jesus finds the forecourt turned into a marketplace, a cattle-yard and a foreign exchange office, - a situation that is anything but helpful to prayer and worship. Filled with righteous anger Jesus upsets the tables of the money changers; makes a whip out of some cords, and drives the life-stock and their merchants out of the Temple, while shouting: “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a marketplace!”

Please notice, by calling the Temple his Father’s house, Jesus is also laying claim to being God’s Son, which is important for the confrontation with the Temple officials which follows. They ask for a sign to show that he has authority for what he has just done. Jesus responds with a challenge of his own, which they fail to recognise. Speaking about himself, he tells them: “Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up.” They choose to ignore that meaning, and ridicule him with the comment that it has taken 46 years to build their Temple, and how can he hope to restore it in 3 days?

For Jesus the story ends there, he has nothing more to say to them, but for us there is an important message. In challenging those officials to recognise himself as God’s sanctuary, Jesus is also challenging us to recognise ourselves, and our bodies in particular, as God’s sanctuary. We are God’s dwelling-place, and if that is true, then we have an obligation to treat ourselves, our bodies, and each other with respect.

And that, in our day, is seriously in question. Where is the respect for life when bullying is rampant, and young people are driven to suicide? Where’s the respect for our bodies when alcohol and drugs are needed for kicks? Where is the respect for others when violence, harassment and abuse are condoned? Where is the respect we have for ourselves, when modesty is thrown to the wind, and sex is used in every possible way to make a buck, or to make a display of oneself?

Our bodies were created to be instruments of God’s care for us, instruments of goodness, of beauty, of truth, - and to the restoration of that respect and integrity is what Lent calls us, as we prepare to celebrate Easter, - the Lord’s Resurrection and ours.