

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT – YEAR B

The first reading gives us the commandments, and they are presented as God's commandments. So, by keeping them we honour God. But whereas the first three directly specify our relationship with God, numbers four to ten directly specify our relationships with one another. They, too, are given by God, and so they name ways we honour God.

More recently, Pope St John Paul II said the same thing, but in very different language; "what it means to be authentically human is the route the Church must take". This doesn't mean he is substituting humans for God; it means that since the fulfilment of human life is God's agenda and purpose in creating, that has to be the Church's agenda too. Every aspect of human life that matters to God needs to matter to us.

How much we matter is what Paul highlights in the second reading. He announces, unapologetically, the shocking news that God could allow himself to be mistreated in the way Christ was. It really was shocking because of who Christ is; Paul knew it was a scandal, and made no sense to reasonable people. But he is also saying that what seems folly to us belongs to a marvellous wisdom: there could be no greater way of illustrating the lengths of God's mercy.

The Jews knew God loved them, but they didn't know how much. What we see on the cross is how much.

What we see there is a love that was never owed to us, never deserved – in fact, undeserved, and unconditional. Those are the characteristics of God's love for us. And since our love for one another is to be modelled on God's love for us, the characteristics of God's love are to be the characteristics of our love for one another – going beyond what is owed or deserved; gratuitous and unconditional. We have transitioned from commandments that require just relationships to Christ's command which requires compassionate and gratuitous love, (though even the Old Testament taught "when you come upon your enemy's ox or ass going astray, see to it that it is returned to him".)

That is what Pope Francis is saying when he reminds us that it is the person of the other that we love, even if we don't like what they are like or have done or are doing. And the blessing at the end of Mass is for everyone, not only those who have received Holy Communion!

And this is also what Pope Benedict was teaching when he said the characteristics of gratuitous and unconditional love are to carry over into all our relationship, including those in the world of business, commerce, trade, industry... That kind of love is transformative because it pre-empts the inequalities and inequities that result directly from the neo-liberal ideology which claims that "the business of business is business" with no concomitant moral obligations.

In this celebration of Eucharist, our union with Christ transforms us to be the kind of people who can transform society. It is God's own love that reaches out through us to one another. This is our wonderful calling and mission.