

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: *Exodus 20:1–17; Psalm 19:7–11**; *Amos 5:14 (NRSV)*; *John 2:13–25**

In Mark, on the day Jesus enters Jerusalem, he goes to the temple and drives out the traders and the moneychangers.¹ In Matthew and Luke, Jesus does this the day after he enters Jerusalem.² In all four gospels, the movement by the Judean leaders to destroy Jesus was well underway before he mounted the colt and rode into Jerusalem. The evangelist we call John places the cleansing of the temple just after the beginning of his ministry. In this gospel, he goes more than once to the great city.

In John, after the wedding at Cana, Jesus spends a few days with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples. John's narrative continues, "The Passover of the Jews was at hand and Jesus went up to Jerusalem."³ He cleared the temple courtyard and proclaimed, "You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."⁴

I've preached many times on the cleansing of the temple. The next story in John is occasioned by the Pharisee Nicodemus, who is among the rulers of the Judeans. He goes at night to see Jesus and cannot understand in this first encounter Jesus' words, "Unless one is born from above, one cannot see the dominion of God."⁵

I've never paid much attention to the three short verses that separate that are more than just an introduction to the next one. So I want to speak about them this morning. I quote from *The New Revised Standard Version*: "When [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and

¹ Mark 11:15–19.

² Matthew 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–48.

³ John 2:13.

⁴ John 2:16.

⁵ John 3:3. My translation. The Greek is inclusive.

needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.”⁶

Commenting on these verses, Raymond Brown wrote, “For John [the evangelist] failure to believe fully is to be traced to the unwillingness of the hearers, not to any secrets on Jesus’ part.”⁷ This theme was set out in the evangelist’s prologue of this gospel: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”⁸

I think the selection of today’s first lesson is significant background for today’s gospel. The ten commandments are found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Each is used as a Sunday lesson once and both times during the current lectionary year. The passage in Deuteronomy is appointed to be read on the Sunday closest to the first of June. Unless Easter Day falls on or before March 26, it’s not heard at Saint Mary’s.

Some in this room will remember that in the old Prayer Book, the service of Holy Communion began with the people kneeling and the priest standing before the Holy Table. He read the collect for purity, and at least once a month, the service continued with a recitation of the Ten Commandments. After each of the first nine was read, the congregation responded, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.” After the final commandment, the response was, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech.”⁹

A favorite book that I bought while in seminary is *Churches the Victorians Forgot* by Mark Chatfield. He was an English photographer interested in

⁶ John 2:23–25. NRSV.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), I:127.

⁸ John 1:12–13.

⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 68–69.

churches built or renovated in light of the Reformation for Prayer Book worship. Roughly 140 churches escaped the Victorians out of some 8,000.¹⁰

One common feature of Prayer Book churches were wall plaques with the Ten Commandments in the center, The Apostles' Creed on the left, and the Lord's Prayer on the right. There are some unchanged Prayer Book churches in rural Virginia and other places too.

Exodus and Deuteronomy include the ten commandments. In Exodus, however, the people are unfaithful while he is on the mountain. The Lord tells Moses that the people have made and are worshipping a golden calf. The unfaithfulness of the people to the Lord is a recurring theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. That story was heard on Sunday last September when the gospel was Jesus speaking in Luke about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

I've been reading a little of the history of the issues arising in the Church of England over the revision of the rite for the Eucharist that eventually produced *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*. It was approved in 2000. One big issue in England is the use of the words "offer" and "offertory."¹¹ Michael Ramsey worried about Pelagianism—the idea that we humans can take steps towards salvation apart from God's grace.¹² No. Only God's grace, recognized or unrecognized, saves us.

Back to what Jesus knows, what God knows about each of us, of all of us, and asks of each of us, of all of us: to believe in his Son.

Scholars generally regard what we know as the last chapter of John as an appendix and view the last words of the previous chapter as its original conclusion. I expect they are familiar to everyone in this room: "Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are

¹⁰ Mark Chatfield, *Church the Victorians Forgot* (Ashbourne, Derbyshire, UK: Moorland Publishing, 1979), 9.

¹¹ Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2012), 323.

¹² I forgot to make a note of where I found this remark by Bishop Ramsey, as he asked us seminarians to address him when he and Lady Ramsey were in residence at Nashotah House.

those who have not seen and yet believe.’ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”¹³ May God keep us all in eternal life.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹³ John 20:29–31.