

A homily for 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday B. Oct. 11, 2009. St Ignatius. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan.

### **“THE COMMANDMENTS—LONG AND SHORT”**

Did you notice that Jesus gives only a summary, a shorthand version of the Ten Commandments? He assumes that the young man knows them. And any good Jew would indeed know them. We can't say always say that about ourselves. When the great Polish filmmaker, Kieslowski, prepared a series of ten one hour films called *Decalogue*, they found it necessary to hand out a copy of the Ten Commandments to people in the theater, so they had some idea of what he was talking about.

Jesus gives an even shorter version of the Decalogue. It is, of course, the command to love God and love neighbor, by which he sums up the whole Law. A frequent mistake Christians make is to think that the Ten Commandments sum up the way Christian should live, the moral code for a disciple. They don't. In the past we drilled them into children, and should have followed them up with the Great Commandment, and the Beatitudes, and at least a few of the parables. Another limitation of the commandments is that most of them are prohibitions, negative statements. “You shall *not*.” Presumably we know that we should do the opposite, but it would be good to hear it. Thus the summary might be: “You shall love life, and preserve it—a reverence for all things living. You shall be faithful to your marriage vows, persevering in your love. You shall be honest and truthful, deceit far from you, just in all your dealings with others. You shall be a person of integrity.”

The young man who comes to Jesus is not a failure. In fact, it says, “Jesus looked at him with love.” He reminds him of something we all find hard to believe, that riches can be a burden to entering whole-heartedly the Christian life. We said *can* be. Remember his other words, “With God all things are possible.”

It helps to distinguish between salvation and holiness. To win eternal life, to pass from life to life, to fuller life, to find completion with God, is our fundamental desire. Death seemingly defeats all that; resurrection faith says that it doesn't. But the point we are making is that salvation, eternal life, even closeness to God and pleasing him, is not difficult to achieve. Partly it depends upon the divine mercy. He made us, and the Potter knows the clay from which we are made. We are fragile, not just in terms of mortality, but

in trying to be good, decent, honest—all the things the young man in the gospel strove for and achieved. The victory is won with God's help, or grace: to be a loving and good person, to overcome sloth and temptations to despair, to keep from spoiling the pleasurable appetites or passions of our bodies. And to keep from those failures of intellect: arrogance and pride. When the young man said, "I have observed all these (the commandments) from my childhood," he was really saying, I am not a bad person. So is he saved? Yes. Is he in danger of judgment? No. Will he go home to God when he dies? Yes. Surely he will need God's mercy and forgiveness; we all do.

That's salvation. The way to holiness (or wholeness) is more difficult. Jesus talks endlessly about entering the kingdom of God. That means more than heaven; it means a closeness to God on earth, a will to continue God's creative act and Jesus' redemptive love. It means to become a genuine disciple, and this is not easy for anyone. The Teacher points out that the rich have certain difficulties. For example, the poor know they need each other, community comes more easily. The rich can retreat from their neighbors, and be unaware, for long periods of life, how much we need each other.

How often you hear the statement that it all comes down to love, just "love one another." That is far more difficult and demanding than we realize. The woman who became President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, wrote a book titled *Love in Chaos*; it referred to the violence in northern Ireland and the fierce divisions that now, at last, may be over. But love in chaos – or absence – continues elsewhere: she wrote this: "A missionary in Rwanda is reported as saying, 'There are no devils left in hell. They are all in Rwanda.' 'But (she asks), weren't the Tutsis Christians? Weren't the Hutus Christians, too? Christian devils perhaps? Does the world know these Christians by their love?'" Then comes a punch line: " *Where the name of Belfast is spoken, is it to give praise for its love?*" It's a powerful statement, try it out for the city of Jerusalem. Or Chicago – or here – where our youth are murdered in the streets. .

The emphasis on love of neighbor sometimes leads to a curious neglect of love of God. Curious, because Jesus commands that love first and foremost: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, with all your mind and strength." The author we are quoting gives a beautiful example of this, telling about her grandmother. She says of her: "She lived poorly and frugally on a tiny farm in the West of Ireland. The richest aspect of her life was her faith, in particular, her prayer life. She walked several miles each

day to morning Mass, winter and summer. By the time I got to know her, she had turned so consciously towards the task of going to morning Mass that she rose earlier and earlier each day until she arrived at the church an hour early. The priest left the key under the stone for her. She would enter the still, dark chapel, light a candle, say the Stations, and then sit in the candlelight until Mass began. At first, I thought her strange. Later, I was grateful for her strangeness and for the gift of her teaching, though in fact she never once explained to me what she was doing or why. But I knew even then that in the stillness, there was a source that gave her courage and hope and meaning. She could not wait to meet her friend. She wanted to spend as much time in his company as possible to learn from him the feel of love and the way of living by his commandments to love.”

Tomorrow from this holy place we send to God a fellow parishioner, Jack Fulham, who had much in common with this Irish grandmother. Especially walking, walking – and often to daily Mass. And piety, a faith that I discovered in depth by sharing mementoes of his prayer life.

Remember the young man of the gospel, the one with many possessions, of whom it says: “Jesus looked at him with love.” Please God, he says that of you and me.