

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-22
What should I expect from God's Church

What should you expect from God's Church? Not what should you want in a church, but what should you expect from God's Church? If you ask ten people what they want in a church you will get ten answers, but if you ask God what you should expect from His Church, you will get a clear answer, and that answer is put before us in our lessons today.

First, what not to expect. Jesus in the Holy Gospel teaches us that God's Church is not a marketplace of ideas, where salvation is bartered, bought and sold, where profits and losses run the show, where moneychangers get the prime lot in the narthex, where the budget gets more airtime than the Bible. God's Church is Christ's Body and it lives and dies with Christ, and it is only as strong as its connection to Him and His Word is.

What can we expect? We can expect God's Church to mine the depths of Scripture and share its treasures with others. It is interesting that St. John keeps mentioning that later, after meditating on Scripture, the disciples realized certain passages were fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. Scripture is to be chewed, digested, and meditated upon, not simply to improve our Bible trivia score, but to deepen our understanding of Christ. God's Church plants the Scriptures in us to bud and flower throughout life.

We can expect God's Church to preach God's law as God intends it to be preached: as His unalterable will for our lives. The law drives us to Christ. If we do not recognize our problem, we will not seek the solution. If we do not admit our sin, we will not hunger for a Savior. Our conscience must tremble with fear before it can be calmed with God's love. We see God's summary of the law in our first lesson today: the Ten Commandments.

Now stop and take a minute to see if, without looking, you can remember the Commandments. I would say it is time to get the Catechism out again, but it is really always time to be studying the truths of the Catechism. Now consider how well you have kept these Commandments, beginning with the first table of the law, our relationship with God. Have you feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things? Have you used the Lord's name in vain, as a curse word, to cover a lie, or as some sort of casual expression of surprise when your friend says something unbelievable? Have you gladly heard and learned His Word and made faithful use of the Sacraments? Do you "get enough religion" as it is now, or are you always ready for more of God's goodness gifted to us in the Means of Grace, always hungry for more Word, more Body and Blood?

Now for the second table of the law, our relationship with our neighbor. Have you honored, respected, and willingly obeyed the laws of the land and those in authority over you, whether parents, government officials, employers, or called workers, even when you did not like them? Have you hated another or have you loved your enemies all the more when they have wronged you? Have you lusted—even so much as a passing thought—after another, viewed your spouse as anything less than a child of God, or allowed your marriage to suffer for the sake of lesser things? Have you stolen, burning CDs that you should buy, borrowing from work what you don't return, keeping what you've found when you know to whom it really belongs? Have you harmed the reputation of another, whether by telling lies about them or by speaking the truth about them when the truth did not need to be told, when love should have covered over their sins? Have you coveted what is not yours or what you cannot have, harboring thoughts that you should chase away? We are to expect God's law to be preached in God's Church, not simply as a segue to the gospel, but in all its severity with all the threats God attaches to it. This is God's law. Have you kept it? If not, God says that you deserve nothing but His wrath and eternal punishment. If you don't think you deserve those things too, then the gospel will mean little to you, and it will be of no benefit for you.

Sometimes the law will not be welcomed with open arms. Believe it or not, there are times when I meet with a member to discuss some sin that has come to my attention and, when we are done talking, they don't hug me, say "Thanks so much, Pastor," and assure me they will immediately correct the sin that has snuck into their lives. Sometimes people get mad at the law, because we by nature don't like being told we are wrong or that we should not do certain things. But there is something that God's Church proclaims that causes even more offense than the law.

You can expect to hear the gospel from God's Church. Part of the reason the gospel is so offensive is because it is the great equalizer. The person who has tried to live right all his life is saved the same way as the prostitute, murderer, or thief. The learned who have studied for decades are saved the same way as the illiterate infant whose only use for a book is to collect drool. For this reason, it is foolishness and a scandal to our sinful flesh and fallen human reason. It seems too easy, too simple, and not spectacular enough, lacking pizzazz and intricacy. But, while the gospel may lack pizzazz and intricacy, it is anything but simple and easy. No, nothing involving the crucified Son of God can be considered simple or easy.

Everyone loves a manger scene. No one would object to a manger scene with a little baby Jesus in it. People love Precious Moments Jesus sitting with children and tending sheep. It is dead-on-a-cross-Jesus that people often have a problem with, but that is precisely the Jesus the Church is called first and foremost to preach. We preach Christ crucified. We hold Christ's pierced body before the world and, worst of all, tell them that their sins made such a horrible sight necessary. The crucifixion of Christ does not only show the unfathomable grace of God, but also the inestimable cost of sin.

The expression "Christ crucified" is not unimportant. St. Paul and the Holy Spirit knew Greek. The perfect tense they used here indicates an event that happened in the past but continues to have an impact in the present. Christ is the crucified one who still bears the marks of His crucifixion after His resurrection and for all eternity, and the benefits of whose crucifixion still abound today into the present. Christ who was crucified is forever Christ crucified, just as Christ who was raised is now forever Christ arisen. This is the good news of the gospel, which is to be proclaimed and distributed to those who have been crushed by the law, not as a band-aid for sin or a steroid shot to make you stronger as you work your salvation, but as the accomplished work and free gift of Christ Jesus overflowing from the font and the chalice, resounding through the Word.

Scripture, law, gospel, Christ Jesus, these are the only unique treasures we as Christians have to offer the world. U2 can give them wicked sweet drum solos. Napoleon Dynamite can give them great dance moves. Dr. Phil can give them advice. Social clubs can give them conversation. The local gym can give them sports. We have the Scriptures, the law, and the gospel. We have Jesus Christ who casts sin out of His temples, that is, believers, and, by His death and resurrection, grants true power and true wisdom through the gospel. We can play the drums if we want. We can bust a move. We can give out some great advice. We can have some marvelous conversations. We can play competitive sports. Those are all wonderful things that we can offer and enjoy as members of churches. But the Scriptures, the law, the gospel, Jesus Christ Himself, these are the things that makes a church God's Church. Offering those things is not an option. That is what God expects of His Church. And thank God for that, because that is what we need more than anything else, and what we need most is what God give us in abundance in Christ crucified. Amen.