

COVENANT, LAWGIVING at SINAI

EXODUS 19:1 - 24:18

¹On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain.

If *ḥodeš* is to be translated ‘new moon’, the people arrive at Sinai ten weeks after the Pasch. If we translate it ‘month’, the time since Pasch is not as definite. In the narrative as it is presented in Exodus, Moses went ahead from Rephidim to Horeb (Sinai) with the elders, where he struck the mountain with God’s staff and God caused water to gush forth for the people (17:6). It was there, too, that he held the staff out over the battlefield (17:9). Chapter eighteen leads us to assume that he returned to Rephidim. Now he brings the people to the mountain. ‘On that very day’ is fulfilled YHWH’s promise to Moses (3:12): not only he, but the people he has led out of Egypt, have arrived safely at YHWH’s sacred abode. We stay with them there till the end of the Book of Exodus, and the kind of literature changes dramatically.

To this point we have been reading the Bible’s favourite way of communicating truth: through stories that have, for the most part, a history of oral transmission prior to their being committed to writing in various places till they found their final place here in the Book of Exodus put together in post-exilic Judah. Now the journeying stops, and the stories are few, as the priest authors write of the various religious observances, legal practices and cultic institutions central to the community life of Israel, presented as revealed and commanded by God through Moses on Mount Sinai.

As a people formed by God, the people of Israel judged that everything essential to their life was inspired by God. Their ethical and cultural life, especially their cult, was what God required of them in response to his choice of them as his special people. Their fidelity in these matters was their side of the covenant they had with God.

There is wide agreement among scholars that large slabs of Exodus 19-40 (especially 25-31 and 35-40) comes from the Priestly School (**P**). However, some of the legal material is among the oldest writing in the Bible (especially 21:18 - 23:19 and 34:17-26). The influence of the Deuteronomic School is sometimes apparent (especially 34:10-16); some of the material may well have been composed in the northern kingdom prior to the collapse of Samaria (721BC), and some comes from writers in Judah after the exile in Babylon (and perhaps before as well). In some places the final authors have blended a number of originally independent traditions into their text. One such place is chapter nineteen which introduces this whole section.

Perhaps the simplest way to understand 19:3-8 is to see it as a summary statement covering the whole of the Sinai material. It begins by highlighting Moses' mediatory role (19:3) – something that will be stressed throughout. It goes on to remind us that the escape from Egypt and the safe crossing of the wilderness is God's work: 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (19:4).

Verse five opens with a typical formula of covenant renewal. YHWH is offering them a wonderful intimacy and a wonderful mission, but it can happen only 'if you obey my voice and keep my covenant' (19:5). Obedience to 'God's voice' is essential to the identity and life of Israel. The details, covering every aspect of their life, are the subject of the rest of this Book. We have already seen some elements linked directly to the Exodus: observing the Pasch and the festival of Unleavened Bread as a perpetual ordinance (12:15,24), and the consecration and redemption of the firstborn son (13:12). We have also been introduced to the observance of the sabbath (16:23), linked to the giving of the manna. But to this point, the accent has been on what YHWH is doing.

These introductory verses ensure that, even though we are going to listen as every detail of the community's life is laid out before us, we do not forget that we are responding in this way to what YHWH is doing. It is obviously important that we freely welcome God's will for us; hence the necessity of obedience – of listening to God's voice. But our response is precisely that: a response. We must never take our eyes off what it is that God is offering, expressed here in a sublime way via three images: God is calling us to be his 'treasured possession', 'a priestly people', and 'a holy nation' (see the following page).

Before we hear any of the details regulating the life of the people so that they can welcome this wonderful intimacy of divine communion, we are told that the people willingly accepted them: 'Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do' (19:8). The covenant is sealed.

³Then Moses went up to God; YHWH called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.

Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that YHWH had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one: "Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to YHWH.

What God is offering

The authors of Exodus offer three images to express what it is that God is offering his people. The first image: though ‘the whole earth is mine, you shall be my treasured possession (s^gullâ) out of all the peoples’(19:5). This special intimacy and communion is expressed especially in Deuteronomy:

YHWH your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

– Deuteronomy 7:6

It is you YHWH has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

– Deuteronomy 14:2

Today YHWH has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you.

– Deuteronomy 26:18

It is found elsewhere:

They shall be mine, says YHWH of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act.

– Malachi 3:17

YHWH has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own treasured possession.

– Psalm 135:4

The second image: ‘you shall be for me a priestly kingdom’(19:6). ‘Treasured possession’ speaks of Israel’s relationship with YHWH. ‘Priestly kingdom’ speaks of Israel’s relationship to God’s world. As YHWH’s own kingdom, and ‘for me’ they are to mediate his word to the world, and draw the world into communion with him. This picks up an essential element of the promise made to Abraham: a theme that permeates Genesis: ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’(Genesis 12:3). Note also:

You shall be called priests of YHWH, you shall be named ministers of our God.

– Isaiah 61:6

The third image: ‘You shall be for me a holy nation’(19:6). Every element of their life as a nation is to demonstrate their consecration to YHWH. The expression ‘holy nation’ is unique, but in the Book of Numbers we read:

All the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and YHWH is among them.

– Numbers 16:3

More than once we hear the refrain:

You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy.

– Leviticus 19:2

The Psalmist writes:

Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

– Psalm 114:2

In his First Letter (2:9), Peter sees the Christian community as fulfilling Exodus 19:6.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Verse nine highlights Moses' role as mediator of the covenant that YHWH is making with Israel (see 19:3). His special role was underlined in the response of the people to the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea: 'the people believed in YHWH *and in his servant Moses*' (14:31).

God is calling Israel to be his 'holy (qādōš) nation' (19:6). Therefore they have to be 'consecrated' (qādaš; 19:10,14). They are to be set apart for God. One requirement is that clothes are washed clean of whatever ordinary activities have taken place (19:10,14; see Genesis 35:2; Revelation 7:14). They are to refrain, too, from another activity, sometimes associated with mysterious taboos: sexual intercourse (19:15; see Revelation 14:4). Furthermore, though they are to be drawn into a special relationship with the Holy One, the unique holiness of God must be respected: the people are excluded from the sanctuary of God's holy mountain (19:12). The penalty for encroaching on the sacred precinct is death. People must not enter the sanctuary even to carry out the killing; it must be done from afar (19:13).

The expression 'the third day' occurs four times in this short passage (19:11 [twice], 15, 16). This is the only time it is found in Exodus, though it is found a number of times in Genesis (1:13; 22:4; 31:22; 34:25; 40:20; 42:18). It indicates an important turn of events, and often, as significantly in this passage, a revelatory action of God. It is picked up in the New Testament when Jesus speaks of his passion and adds that he will be raised 'on the third day' (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). Whatever people do to Jesus, 'on the third day' – on the day when God is revealed – he knows he will be raised to the fullness of life in communion with God.

The awesomeness of 'meeting God' (19:17) is dramatised in the thunder, lightning, cloud, the prolonged blast of the trumpet (yōbēl; 19:13) and the loud heralding of the ram's horn (šōpār; 19:16).

⁹Then YHWH said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." When Moses had told the words of the people to YHWH,
¹⁰**YHWH said to Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹and prepare for the third day, because on the third day YHWH will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.**

¹²**You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.'** When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up to the mountain."

¹⁴**So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵And he said to the people, "Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman."**

¹⁶**On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a horn so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.**

¹⁷**Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain.**

¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because YHWH had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. ¹⁹As the blast of the horn grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.

²⁰When YHWH descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, YHWH summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹Then YHWH said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people not to break through to YHWH to look; otherwise many of them will perish. ²²Even the priests who approach YHWH must consecrate themselves or YHWH will break out against them." ²³Moses said to YHWH, "The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.'"

²⁴YHWH said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to YHWH; otherwise he will break out against them." ²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them.

'Fire', 'smoke', and earthquake reinforce the awesome power of the presence of the transcendent ('holy') God (19:18; see Psalm 104:32). The blast of the horn grows louder and louder (19:19), as we stand with the people at the foot of the mountain, while Moses, the mediator of the covenant, converses with God. God's words are as thunder to the awe-struck people.

As noted earlier, the authors are drawing on different renditions of the same story. As the passage stands, verses twenty to twenty-five reinforce the mediatory role of Moses and the necessity of preparation for the imminent revelation of God. Even Moses thinks that the requirements of respecting God's transcendence have been adequately declared (19:23), but YHWH wants more. The sacredness of what is to be declared cannot be over-estimated.

The people must be left in no doubt (19:21). 'Even the priests who approach YHWH must consecrate themselves' (19:22; see 19:24). The fact that we have heard nothing about 'priests' to this point is not relevant. The text is emphasising that no one (including the priests reading this text) is to think lightly of approaching the all-holy God.

In its imagery, in its repetition of Moses' mediatory role and of the dire consequences of encroaching upon sacred ground, chapter nineteen has emphasised the importance of what God is to reveal through Moses to the people of Israel.

The content of the revelation follows in chapter twenty. After the insistence on Moses' role as mediator, it comes as something of a surprise to have 'Aaron' suddenly appearing in the text (19:24). We have noted earlier how the Priestly School is keen to introduce Aaron (the priest) whenever possible, to highlight the mediatory role of the institutional priesthood in the cult.

The Letter to the Hebrews recalls the awe of this encounter and compares it to the awe of being present in the Eucharistic gathering:

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.")

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

– Hebrews 12:18-24

Christians have been called to approach another mountain on which darkness and fear are replaced by a festal gathering of angels and all those who share in the inheritance that belongs to Jesus, the 'first born' (Hebrews 1:6). This is 'the city of our God, which God establishes forever' (Psalm 48:8; see Psalm 87:1-7), the 'heavenly Jerusalem', the city prepared for Abraham (see Hebrews 11:16), the 'city that is to come' (Hebrews 13:14). We are already approaching this mountain and this city when we come 'to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant', who is even now present among his brothers and sisters 'in the midst of the congregation' praising his Father (see Hebrews 2:12).

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Chapter Nineteen prepares us for the rest of the Book of Exodus. In a special way, however, it prepares us for 20:1-17. The special place of these verses is demonstrated in a number of ways. They are found (with some variations) in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. The content of these verses is given a special name: 'the words of the covenant' (b'rit), the ten words ('decalogue', Exodus 34:28). It is referred to as the 'witness' or 'constitution' ('ēdūt, Exodus 31:18), the 'law (tôrâ) and the commandment (mišwâ)' (Exodus 24:12). Its importance is such that YHWH is portrayed as inscribing it himself on both sides (Exodus 32:15) of two stone tablets (Exodus 24:12), which were deposited in the ark within the sanctuary (Exodus 25:16).

The whole life of God's holy people is regulated in obedience to God's word, but no other expression of God's will is given such prominence. The first set of commandments summarises the essence of the people's relationship with God. The second set of commandments draws out the essential implications which the special relationship with God has for relationships within the community. These verses draw on and express in summary form material found in the prophetic critique (see Hosea 4:1-3; Jeremiah 7:9). Jesus' own summary follows the same line, speaking first of God and only then of one's neighbour:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

– Matthew 22:37-40

**¹Then God spoke
all these words:**

**²I am YHWH your
God, who brought
you out of the land
of Egypt, out of the
house of slavery**

The solemn preparation for this revelation ensures that we listen in profound reverence. The introduction (20:1) is brief. In other places God's words are addressed to Moses who is to relay them (see 20:22; 34:32). Here there is no need to highlight Moses' role as mediator; it has been stressed throughout chapter nineteen. YHWH is addressing the people as a people ('your' in verse two and throughout is in the *singular*). Each member of the community is to hear the words addressed to him/herself personally. We are being addressed by the One who has liberated us from slavery, and has borne us on eagles' wings and brought us to himself (19:4). The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt, with no law to protect them, and no rights. God heard their cry and liberated them from oppression. He is about to spell out the demands of living a life that is truly free.

'I am YHWH' is how God addressed Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and Jacob (Genesis 28:13). We recall especially God's words to Moses (Exodus 6:2-8), where he assured Moses that he remembered his 'promise' (b^crit, 6:5). This section is about the 'promise' (b^crit, 19:5) – translated now as 'covenant' (19:5), for it goes beyond what God is promising to include how we are to respond in order to enjoy what God is offering.

God wants to be in an especially intimate communion with us as his 'treasured possession' (19:5), and as members of his 'priestly kingdom' and 'holy nation' (19:6). The liberating and the offering of communion is unconditional, but cannot be automatic, for God is love and respects our freedom. Only a response of love allows God's unconditional love to draw us into this extraordinarily intimate communion. God wants us to know what we need to do to respond to his love and to welcome the intimacy that he offers. God's answer to this need is the content of the following verses.

This covenant law which governed the life of the people of ancient Israel was seen by them to be basic to their very existence as a people. They considered it to be a gift to them from God, the author of life itself and the one who formed them into a nation. They saw themselves as being privileged to have it and they delighted in it as in a treasured gift:

The law of YHWH is perfect, reviving the soul.
the decrees of YHWH are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of YHWH are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of YHWH is clear, enlightening the eyes.

– Psalm 19:7-8

As noted earlier, among the many laws that regulated every aspect of their communal and personal lives, the ‘Ten Words’(Decalogue) held a special place. They express in summary form the basic imperatives which the people were to follow in their relations to God and to each other. Jesus himself lived by them and referred to them, as do the authors of the New Testament. For Jews, Christians and Moslems they remain, still today, a basic rule of life.

The fact that for the most part the two accounts of the ‘ten words’(Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21) are identical in wording is an indication of the care with which ancient traditions were handed down through the centuries. The fact that there are differences in the accounts shows that the authors knew that their God was a living God, and that they had to keep listening to his word and striving to penetrate to the full meaning of the way which God was inspiring them to live. One cannot over-estimate the importance of the words which hold the revelation. However, Israel placed its faith, not in the human words, but in God himself who was constantly present in their history, and who was constantly revealing his will to them in the events of their history and in the words of their prophets.

The basic laws protecting life, marriage and the right to whatever is needed to sustain these (Exodus 20:13-15; Deuteronomy 5:17-19) can be found in ancient Near East codes of law that pre-date Exodus. The code found in the Torah goes beyond them in that it is concerned with motivation and intention and not only actions (Exodus 20:16-17; Deuteronomy 5:20-21). But, more importantly, the laws regulating social behaviour are founded on a relationship with YHWH, the God of the Exodus. Social responsibilities flow from the covenant which God has made with his people. It is for this reason that the code begins with commandments which regulate our behaviour in relation to God.

The text is clear that there are ten words (see 34:28). It is not clear on how exactly the words are to be numbered. Since the time of Clement of Alexandria (died c.215AD) verses one to six have traditionally been considered to make up the first word (commandment). This is the system we are following in this commentary.

The conventional Jewish tradition is to count verse one as the first ‘word’ and verses two to six as the second ‘word’.

Others reckon verses one to three as the first commandment, and verses four to six as the second commandment.

³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

for I YHWH your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,

⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The importance of this commandment is indicated by its comparative length and by its position in the code. It is the relationship which the community has with God that will ultimately determine the relationship which the members will have with each other. Worship of false 'gods' is a form of slavery. YHWH has liberated them from more than physical slavery in Egypt.

We are not commanded to worship an abstract god. It is not a matter of managing to put the right name, 'YHWH', on any god we might choose to follow. When we worship, we are to worship the one who liberated the people of Israel from Egypt, and no other. If we worship the God who hates oppression, we will not be tempted to oppress each other; if we make our first and ultimate concern the worship of YHWH, we will listen to his word and obey his commands. It is this truth which is at the heart of the 'Ten Words'. The ultimate question is not: 'Do you or do you not believe in and worship God?'; but rather: 'Who is the God in whom you believe and whom you worship?' The 'Ten Words' demand that it be YHWH: the God who hears the cry of the poor (see Exodus 3:7).

This commandment goes on to warn against creating our own 'gods', only to be enslaved by them. 'Idols'(images in stone, clay or metal) are an obvious danger in a world where such images were rife. We can make idols of our own will, our own desires. Even the words of the Bible or the words in which we are accustomed to express our faith in God can be an 'idol'.

To speak of God as 'jealous'(5:9; see 4:24) is to say that there is no substitute for real love, and that the source of real love is YHWH and no other. God does not want us wasting our lives, giving ourselves to false 'gods'.

God assures us of his 'steadfast love'(ḥesed, covenant loyalty). We can be confident that God will never break the covenant. When Moses asked God's name, he was told 'I will be who I will be'(see commentary on Exodus 3:14). We are called to trust that God is with us and to walk with God into our future knowing that God will be there with us and for us. We are called to 'love'('ahab) this God who has freed us and is carrying us (1:31), and to 'keep'(šāmar) his commandments (5:10) that spell out the path of freedom and life.

When the people of Israel asked: 'Who is God?', they were able to point to the Exodus. We who have come to know Jesus can point to him, and to that more catholic ('universal'), and more complete liberation which he effected by his compassionate love. Just as all their images of 'God' had to be checked against the experience of the Exodus, so all our images must be checked against Jesus: his prayer, his faith, his life given in carrying out his mission of love.

The God of the Exodus and the God and Father of Jesus cannot be represented in the fixed forms of cult images. God cannot be contained within even the inspired words of Sacred Scripture or the infallible expressions of dogma. God remains mysteriously transcendent, and so we must remain always open to the surprise of God's word: the way God chooses to reveal himself in history. Faithful to what he has done in the Exodus and in Jesus, and listening humbly and obediently to his word spoken within the community of the faithful, we must remain always ready to journey on into the mystery of divine communion. We are not allowed to limit our attention to what is obvious. We are not allowed to be content with religious routine. We may not control the divine or make it predictable. We must not worship anything less than the real, living God: that is the message of the first commandment.

Failure to obey the first commandment has bad effects on ourselves and on those whom our behaviour affects. What we do matters. We cannot pretend that it is otherwise. Neither does God pretend. This is not the place to pursue a careful theological exploration of the theme of divine 'wrath' or 'punishment'. How we see these will depend on whether or not we imaging God as controlling the world (see the treatment in the Introduction). While there are disturbing elements of communal guilt and communal responsibility in the scriptures, and while there is an understanding in some places that the source of infection must be eradicated to prevent it spreading (even if this means that the innocent are caught up in the suffering), there is also an insistence on God's justice, and that only the guilty are punished (see Ezekiel 18:4). Nor does God inflict arbitrary evil on those who do not obey, as though 'divine punishment' were an extra added on to punish the sinner. 'Punishment' is the effect brought on by sin itself. God uses it to draw us to repentance, but if we are hard-hearted and obstinate in behaving unjustly, we cannot just wish away the evil results, and God, the truthful one, must judge things to be the way they are.

If we remain obstinate and refuse to learn from the effects of our sinful behaviour, and if we die unrepentant, Jesus himself speaks of the eternal punishment of hell. This is not something that God imposes on the sinner. It is, as defined by the Catholic Catechism, 'a state of definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed' (n.1033).

At the same time, as the final words of the commandment make clear, divine initiative is always loving. Those who 'hate' God, that is to say, those who do not allow God's creating and redeeming love to be effective in their lives, will end up destroying themselves and hurting others. The hurt can carry on to our grandchildren and their children (see Ezekiel 18:2). However, there is no comparison between the effects of sin and the effects of love. The latter never end, but continue to radiate good 'to the thousandth generation', for love (faithfully carrying out God's will) enables entry into the world of the liberating love of YHWH.

The Second Commandment

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

The second commandment goes much further than ensuring that we refer to God in a polite way, or that we refrain from perjury, or from taking oaths in a trivial way, though it includes these (see Sirach 23:23:9-11; Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12). It applies to everything that we do in God's name. The person who claims to be speaking for God, but whose words do not come from God, is breaking this commandment. The person or institution that, in God's name, behaves in ways that are not consistent with the action of God in the Exodus or in Jesus, is breaking this commandment. Anyone who would attempt, however subtly, to confine God within the limits of human words or customs is breaking this commandment.

When we reflect on all the injustices that have been done in God's name, and on all the imperfect images of God that have been imposed on people in God's name, we begin to realise how radical this commandment is. We must be very careful when we call on God to support our teaching. Prophecy, theology, liturgy and prayer can be genuine and they can be false. They can be authentic expressions of genuine religious encounters with the living God, or they can be substitutes for such an encounter. The second commandment demands the utmost care of us when we speak or act in God's name.

The only two positive commandments, the third and fourth, take us to the heart of the family and provide a basic model for the way we should relate to God and to each other. The third commandment is addressed to those responsible for the household. The fourth commandment is addressed to adults and concerns the way we are to relate to our aged parents.

The authors of Exodus have already introduced us to sabbath observance when they connected it with the giving of the manna (see the commentary on Exodus 16:5, 22-30). A lot is said about stopping work. The name 'sabbath' (šabbāt) is related to the verb 'to stop' (šābat). However, the perspective must not be missed: ceasing work is so that the day can be 'kept holy' (20:8). We are to be God's holy nation' (19:6), consecrated to God, who 'rested on the seventh day' (20:11).

The third commandment has powerful symbolic value. Positively there is the command to work: we have the obligation and the privilege of continuing God's creative and redeeming work (20:9). There is, however, a danger that we will think that everything depends upon us. There is also the danger that the systems of authority that are basic to social organisation will appear absolute, and that those under authority will be treated as of lesser dignity than those who exercise authority.

The seventh day, therefore, stands as a symbol of our need for God and of our equality before God. This day is to be set aside so that everyone ('you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns') may 'rest', may have the space to attend to God. We are to remember God's resting, and so the very purpose of creation (Genesis 2:1-3), which was to have this special covenant relationship.

Even though some of the elements of this commandment were linked to the Christian Sunday, this is a commandment that Gentile Christians were not expected to observe. Jesus is shown as putting the focus on love rather than on not working (see John 7:21-23; Mark 2:25-27). Ignatius of Antioch (early second century) explains:

We have seen how former adherents of the ancient customs have since attained to a new hope; so that they have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's day instead, the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to him and his death. That death, though some deny it, is the very mystery which has moved us to become believers, and endure tribulation to prove ourselves pupils of Jesus Christ, our sole teacher.

– Letter to the Magnesians n.9

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

⁹Six days you shall labour and do all your work.

¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to YHWH your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

¹¹For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore YHWH blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

The Fourth Commandment

¹²Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that YHWH your God is giving you.

In the fourth commandment our attention moves from ourselves as parents having authority to ourselves as children owing honour to our aged parents. To honour one's parents includes respect, care and affection. It is to acknowledge that the life we have is received as a gift. It is also to remember that the promises of God and the gift of the law come to us through our parents. To honour one's parents is to be ready to give them back in their need what they gave us in ours. Besides giving an extended treatment of this topic in chapter three, Sirach writes:

With all your heart honour your father,
and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother.
Remember that it was of your parents you were born;
how can you repay what they have given to you?

– Sirach 7:27-28

Tobit's admonition to his son reads:

My son, when I die, give me a proper burial. Honor your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do whatever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave.

– Tobit 4:3-4

Proverbs frequently touches on this theme.

The values inculcated in the family by the third and fourth commandments provide the basis for all the positive values that are to inform human interaction. They direct us to recognise that in all we do we are instruments of God's creative and redemptive action, and that everything is a gift to be accepted with gratitude and shared in love. If we do this we will be God's instruments (God's 'priestly kingdom', 19:6) in bringing about the reign of God's love on earth.

The following three commandments are expressed without comment. As with the other commandments in this summary text, no sanctions are mentioned. The decalogue expresses the essential conditions of the covenant. It will need to be followed up with specific legislation. The ‘you’ in each case is singular. These commands aim to protect a person’s right to life, to marriage and family, and to those simple basic possessions without which one cannot live or rear a family with security and dignity. These commands are directed to members of the covenant community of Israel. The word ‘neighbour’, for example, in 20:16 (rēa‘) refers to a fellow citizen.

In Genesis 9:6 we read:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person’s blood be shed;
for in his own image God made humankind.

The command stated here is more restricted. The word translated ‘murder’(20:13) is rāṣaḥ. As it stands it is not against capital punishment, or killing an enemy in war, or suicide – though the principle does bear on these and related matters. What is forbidden is the illegal taking of the life of a member of the community of Israel, even in revenge for a crime committed by that person. A member of the covenant community of Israel is not to take the law into his own hands.

‘Committing adultery’(nā’ap) is called the ‘great sin’(Genesis 20:9; see Genesis 39:9).

The commandment against stealing was not understood as protecting possessions unjustly acquired, or luxuries held in the face of deprivation and poverty. The prophets accuse the rich of stealing from the poor (Isaiah 5:1-17; Amos 4:1-3; 6:1-7; 8:4-8).

Apart from this penetrating prophetic critique, these three basic laws are found in all the neighbouring peoples of the ancient Middle East, for no community can survive without them.

It is important to observe that all of these commandments are phrased negatively. They say what one is not to do, and thus act as a protection against injustice, tracing the outer parameters within which the community is to live its life.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

The Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Commandments

To calculate ten commandments, the traditional Christian numbering requires the dividing of verse twenty-one into two commandments. For this reason some keep verse twenty-one as one and separate verses six and seven from verses eight to ten. On the numbering of the 'ten words' see page 105.

In these final commandments we observe the remarkable moral perception that was part of Israel's identity in the ancient world: concern for intention as well as action.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

In a society which depended greatly on the threat of capital punishment to maintain law and order, there is obviously a close connection between the eighth commandment (20:16) and the fifth commandment (20:13). It is wrong to unjustly take another person's life; it is also wrong to lie about others in court in such a way as to bring about their death. The law tried to defend the innocent against such false witness by requiring at least two witnesses in matters punishable by the death penalty (Numbers 35:30).

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

In a similar way the ninth and tenth commandments (20:17) are linked to the sixth (20:14) and seventh (20:15): seeking to win over another person's wife can easily lead to adultery; giving in to envy of another's possessions can easily lead to stealing (see Micah 2:1-4)..

These final commandments move inward from the area of overt action to that of intention, recognising the importance of attitude, and of the heart. It is this movement that Jesus takes even further in his presentation of the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48). He is quoted as saying: 'out of the heart come evil intentions' (Matthew 15:19).

Exodus and Deuteronomy (5:17-21) differ slightly in the wording of some of the fifth to the tenth commandments. The most interesting difference is that Deuteronomy links them all with an 'and', highlighting the fact that they are not simply separate laws, but form a tightly interconnected unit. To break any of them is to put the others in jeopardy. A classical example of this is David's breaking of the ninth commandment. He coveted his neighbour's wife. This led to adultery, then to lying, and then to murder (2Samuel 11). Coveting (ḥāmad) was also Eve's downfall (Genesis 3:6).

The Ten Commandments in the New Testament

The commandments that focus on God permeate the teaching of Jesus and the reflections upon him that make up the New Testament. He is quoted as citing the commandments about the way we relate to each other in his dialogue with the rich young man who wanted to know how to live a perfect life. Jesus replied:

You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.

– Mark 10:19 (see Matthew 19:17-19; Luke 18:20)

Jesus is also quoted as declaring:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 5:17-19

Paul writes:

The commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

– Romans 13:9-10

We know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful [1-2], for the unholy and profane [3], for those who kill their father or mother [4], for murderers [5], fornicators, sodomites [6], slave traders [7], liars, perjurers [8], and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

– 1 Timothy 1:8-11

James picks up the point that the commandments form a unified whole:

Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

– James 2:10-11

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” ²¹Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

To read these chapters of Exodus as though we were reading a factual account of what actually happened on Mount Sinai, including an accurate temporal sequence of events, is to misread the text. This is a theological reflection. Its aim is to state that the religious observances, legal practices and cultic institutions of Israel have God as their author.

Before presenting the ‘Ten Words’, the authors told us that the people committed themselves (and so their descendants) to observing them: ‘Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do’ (19:8). The reaction of fear noted here comes from a deeper awareness of the demands of following God’s will.

Much was said, too, about God’s choice of Moses as his mediator with the people (see 19:9,19). Here we are being told that this was also something that the people requested and accepted. What is being stressed is the holiness (transcendence) of God. Our experience of God is always mediated.

Stressed, too, is that we are not to be afraid of God. God is inviting us into an intimate communion (19:5-6). What is required of us is absolute obedience (the meaning of ‘fear of him’). The Book of Proverbs expresses well the meaning of this ‘fear’ in the following texts:

The fear of YHWH is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance ... I hate.

– Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

– Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.

– Proverbs 14:27

Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6). The fear of the Lord is the opposite of ‘pride and arrogance’. It is ‘knowing the Holy One’: knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour. It results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’.

As noted in the Introduction, the authors of Exodus were careful to preserve whatever material was available to them from oral or written tradition. Their care flowed from their conviction that the people of Israel were God's own people, and that every part of their life had its origin in God's will.

While much of the memory of a people was handed down through storytelling, and found written form only later, it is not uncommon throughout the Ancient Near East (and elsewhere) for the earliest written records to consist of legal and cultic material.

The section beginning here and extending through to 23:19 is among the oldest written material in the Bible, in all likelihood composed during the period of Hezekiah at the end of the eighth century, but expressing quite ancient customs. It is traditionally called the 'covenant code' from the term found in 24:7. Some of this material, including 20:22-26, is specifically Israelite. Some (see 21:1 - 22:16) is an expression of tribal custom, parallels to which can be found in other Near Eastern cultures.

Verse twenty-two links the ancient code with Sinai and so with God's will and with the origins of the people as God's covenant people (compare 19:3). The link was as old as the people's identification as a people formed by God.

Fittingly, the first code concerns worship. Verse twenty-three binds it to the first commandment (20:2-6).

The specifications concerning the altar show the concern of tribal Israel to separate itself from the surrounding Canaanite culture. The altar is to be of earth (20:24), or if stone, the stone must not be dressed (20:25) – as were the Canaanite altars. Furthermore, altars (and so cult worship) were to be constructed only in places where God had revealed his presence (20:24). A reading of Genesis points to Shechem (12:7), Bethel (12:8), Hebron (13:8), and Beer-sheba (26:25). No doubt each tribal area had its special centre.

The avoidance of steps (20:26) seems to be a way of separating Israel's cult from that to the Canaanite high god, El. The reference to 'nakedness' was to separate Israel's cult from the sexual dimension found in the cult of Canaan.

²²YHWH said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: "You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. ²³You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.

²⁴You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your *communion sacrifices*, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

²⁵But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it.

²⁶You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it."

¹These are the edicts that you shall set before them:

²When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. ⁵But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," ⁶then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life.

⁷When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. ⁹If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. ¹¹And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.

The following are called 'edicts'(mišpāt), not 'words'(dābār), as in 20:1. The first section (21:1 - 22:17) consists of decrees governing social order. Equivalent decrees can be found throughout the ancient Near East. There is little in these regulations to identify them as specifically affected by the covenant. One could describe them as Israelite tribal law.

They begin with the treatment of Hebrew slaves. The word 'Hebrew' seems to be derived from a word (habiru) that was used throughout the ancient Near East for stateless people who were an easy prey for slave-owners (like the slaves in Egypt). Probably because of their origins, the Israelites used this term to distinguish themselves from Egyptians and Philistines (regularly in Genesis and Exodus). Hebrews could be sold into slavery by impoverished parents, or for theft, or by their own choice. Their existence shows how slow cultural habits are to change even when they contradict key religious insights. A limit of six years is set (21:2), though a slave can freely choose to stay on if he so wishes (21:5-6). Female slavery (21:7-11) was more complex as she was assumed to be in a sexual relationship with her master.

There are regulations governing slavery in Deuteronomy 15:12-18 and Leviticus 25:39-55. The text here in Exodus represents the oldest of the three codes. Each code claims YHWH as its author, and there are a number of similarities. However, the differences are significant. The fact that all three codes are preserved highlights an essential insight into the mind of the biblical authors. Each code was seen to reveal God's will. But God was never considered bound by his revelation and was always free to adapt his will to changing situations. The fact that the authors retained earlier expressions of God's will alongside later ones shows their respect for God's revelation, and their awareness that older expressions held a wisdom that should never be lost. The authors saw their tradition as a living one requiring constant listening to God's voice mediated to the community by Moses and then by those who inherited his spirit.

These verses, too, contain ancient tribal laws. The common element is punishment by death. Clearly such a severe and final punishment was considered necessary to maintain order in tribal society. Clearly, too, these tribal laws were judged to have divine sanction – hence their inclusion here.

The first crime listed is murder (see 20:13), and verses twelve to fourteen reveal an ancient attempt to deal with unpremeditated killing. Since the death was not intended by the person who did the striking, it is termed an ‘act of God’ (21:13). Since God was assumed to control the world, the death must have been God’s will. Since God is just, God would not intend capital punishment for such a killing, and so the killer is offered asylum (sanctuary) at God’s altar.

The need for the accidental killer to flee is explained by the tribal obligation on the closest relative of the killed person (the ‘blood redeemer’, *gō’ēl haddām*) to avenge his death, whether the death was intended or not. Not to avenge the death of one’s blood relative was deemed a serious failure of responsibility. The dead person’s blood, like the blood of Abel, ‘cries out to God from the ground’ (Genesis 4:10) and must be avenged. Gideon avenged those who killed his brother (Judges 8:18-21), as did Joab (2Samuel 3:27). It was their duty.

Where guilt was established, the killer would be handed over to the ‘blood redeemer’ by the elders of the city for execution (see Deuteronomy 19:12). If the person responsible for an accidental killing reached the sanctuary before he was apprehended he could find sanctuary there. No one would dare touch a guest in God’s ‘tent’. If the blood redeemer caught up with him outside the sanctuary, however, so important was his right to vengeance considered that if he killed him, he was considered guiltless (Numbers 35:26–28; Deuteronomy 19:5–6).

Verses fifteen and seventeen show how central respect for parents was in tribal Israelite society. These laws, as was the case with the fourth commandment (20:12) are addressed to adults in relation to their aged parents.

Kidnapping (21:16) is an extreme example of breaking the seventh commandment (stealing, 20:15). This represents a tightening up of law. for there was no threat of death against Joseph’s brothers when they kidnapped him and sold him into slavery (Genesis 37:23-28).

¹²Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death. ¹³If it was not premeditated, but came about by an act of God, then I will appoint for you a place to which the killer may flee. ¹⁴But if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution.

¹⁵Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death.

¹⁶Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death.

¹⁷Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.

¹⁸When individuals quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or fist so that the injured party, though not dead, is confined to bed, ¹⁹but recovers and walks around outside with the help of a staff, then the assailant shall be free of liability, except to pay for the loss of time, and to arrange for full recovery.

²⁰When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. ²¹But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property.

²²When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine.

²³If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

²⁶When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. ²⁷If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth.

The form in which these regulations are written is the same as 21:2-11. Verses eighteen to thirty-six give further examples of the kind of case law that was typical of codes in the ancient Near East. These concern bodily injury.

The first regulation (21:18-19) explains what to do when fighting leads to injury, not to death.

The second (21:20-21) describes what is to happen to a slave owner if he kills or injures a slave. It seems to be assumed that killing was not intentional (the owner would suffer an economic disadvantage). However it is hard to avoid the conclusion that a slave was considered of less value than a citizen.

The fact that verse twenty-one ('the slave is the owner's property') was used for centuries by 'Christian' slave-owners to justify having slaves and treating them as less than human should be a warning against treating these words, without qualification, as expressing God's will. That is certainly how they were understood by the authors: 'YHWH said to Moses: these are the ordinances that you shall set before them' (20:22, 21:1). However, as was stressed in the Introduction, we must not ignore their human limitations, especially the limitations inherent in their culture. Furthermore, every word of scripture must be read in the light of the fullness of revelation given in Jesus.

Verse twenty-two deals with the punishment of a brawler who happens to harm a bystander who is pregnant. This leads to a general principle that a punishment should be the equivalent of the harm caused (21:23-25). We have already seen an example where a murderer forfeits his own life (21:12). This principle, found in other ancient Near Eastern codes, sets a limit on retaliation, thus providing some protection against tyranny of the powerful. Jesus goes much further (see Matthew 5:38-39), telling us not to retaliate but to continue loving.

Verses twenty-six to twenty-seven are a deterrent against mistreatment of slaves.

Verses twenty-eight to thirty-two have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern codes, though the severity of the punishment in verse twenty-nine ('its owner shall be put to death') is beyond that found in these codes. When the owner's neglect causes someone to die, it is treated as the equivalent of murder (21:2).

Verses thirty-three to thirty-six treat of the kind of restitution required when a person is responsible for the death of another person's ox or donkey. There is nothing specifically Israelite about these regulations either. Like the other laws in this section they are typical of tribal law in the ancient Near East.

²⁸When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. ²⁹If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. ³⁰If a ransom is imposed on the owner, then the owner shall pay whatever is imposed for the redemption of the victim's life. ³¹If it gores a boy or a girl, the owner shall be dealt with according to this same rule. ³²If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slaveowner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.

³³If someone leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, ³⁴the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to its owner, but keeping the dead animal.

³⁵If someone's ox hurts the ox of another, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the price of it; and the dead animal they shall also divide. ³⁶But if it was known that the ox was accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not restrained it, the owner shall restore ox for ox, but keep the dead animal.

¹When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep

**–
²If a thief is found breaking in, and is beaten to death, no blood-guilt is incurred; ³but if it happens after sunrise, bloodguilt is incurred**

**–
the thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft.**

⁴When the animal, whether ox or donkey or sheep, is found alive in the thief's possession, the thief shall pay double.

⁵When someone causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets livestock loose to graze in someone else's field, restitution shall be made from the best in the owner's field or vineyard.

⁶When fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, the one who started the fire shall make full restitution.

⁷When someone delivers to a neighbour money or goods for safekeeping, and they are stolen from the neighbour's house, then the thief, if caught, shall pay double. ⁸If the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall be brought before God, to determine whether or not the owner had laid hands on the neighbour's goods.

These regulations cover restitution for the theft of an animal.

A clause (22:2-3) is inserted to cover what happens if the thief is apprehended and killed. On the subject of bloodguilt see the comments on the *gō'ēl* (21:12-14). Because this clause breaks the logic, some translations rearrange the verses. I have stayed with the order of the Hebrew text, indicating the insertion with '–'.

These regulations cover restitution for grazing on another person's field or vineyard.

These regulations cover restitution for causing loss by fire.

What is to happen when deposited goods go missing? If no thief is apprehended the one with whom the goods have been deposited will have to go to the sanctuary, where his guilt or innocence will be decided. We are not told whether an oath is required and sufficient, or whether the decision was made by following a rite in which it was presumed God made the situation clear. See the following verses.

Verses nine to fifteen record regulations concerning animals. In the situation envisaged in verse eleven, declaring one's innocence on oath is deemed sufficient proof. By contrast, verse nine seems to speak of a ritual that was judged to discover God's judgment. The Book of Numbers chapter five speaks of one such process.

⁹In any case of disputed ownership involving ox, donkey, sheep, clothing, or any other loss, of which one party says, "This is mine," the case of both parties shall come before God; the one whom God condemns shall pay double to the other.

¹⁰When someone delivers to another a donkey, ox, sheep, or any other animal for safekeeping, and it dies or is injured or is carried off, without anyone seeing it, ¹¹an oath before YHWH shall decide between the two of them that the one has not laid hands on the property of the other; the owner shall accept the oath, and no restitution shall be made. ¹²But if it was stolen, restitution shall be made to its owner. ¹³If it was mangled by beasts, let it be brought as evidence; restitution shall not be made for the mangled remains.

¹⁴When someone borrows an animal from another and it is injured or dies, the owner not being present, full restitution shall be made.

¹⁵If the owner was present, there shall be no restitution; if it was hired, only the hiring fee is due.

¹⁶When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife.

¹⁷But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins.

Laws covering seduction focus on the male taking appropriate responsibility for his action. The regulations are restricted to a 'virgin who is not engaged' (22:16). If she is engaged his action was considered adultery, for which the penalty was death (see Deuteronomy 22:23-27).

By placing this law here the authors are claiming divine authority for it. That it is culturally conditioned is obvious when we consider that the only two relevant decisions are those made by the man responsible and the girl's father. Her will carries no weight in law.

Behaviour expected of YHWH's people

¹⁸You shall not permit a female sorcerer to live.

¹⁹Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death.

²⁰Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than YHWH alone, shall be devoted to destruction.

²¹You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; ²⁴my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

²⁵If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.

²⁶If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; ²⁷for it may be your neighbour's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbour cries out to me, I will listen, for I am *gracious*.

²⁸You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people.

²⁹You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses.

The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

³¹You shall be people consecrated to me; therefore you shall not eat any meat that is mangled by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

Like 21:12-17, verses eighteen to twenty list crimes that are to be punished by death. Verses nineteen and twenty are also expressed in the same legal formulation ('Whoever ...'). Verse twenty gives the penalty for breaking the first commandment (20:5). The expression 'devoted to destruction' (*ḥāram*) goes beyond killing to include eradication of family and forfeiting of property.

There is a significant shift in focus in the regulations in this second part of the so-called 'Book of the Covenant'. They draw out the implications of the covenant for morality and cult, and separate Israel out from its neighbours.

Verses twenty-one to twenty-seven indicate profound reflection on the nature of God as revealed in the Exodus (One who hears the cry of the oppressed), on their identity as a people freed from oppression by YHWH, and on what this must mean for the way they treat people who can easily become victims of oppression. This is the first time the adjective 'gracious' (*ḥannûn*, 22:27) has been used to describe Israel's God, though YHWH's graciousness is noted in Genesis 33:5,11 and 43:29.

In verse twenty-eight the authority of the 'leader' (*nāšî'*) is linked with God. To 'curse' is to act in a way that tries to deprive the leader of God's blessing.

On the consecration of the firstborn see Exodus 13:1-2. In verse thirty-one a food taboo is reinforced by the reminder that they are a people set apart for God, a 'holy nation' (19:6).

Verse thirty-one seems to witness to a practice that differs from that found earlier in 21:35-36.

God's anger/wrath

Genesis speaks of God's anger (ḥārâ) only once, when Abraham is pleading with God not to be angry with him (Genesis 18:30,32). The only time God's anger has been mentioned in Exodus to this point is when we were told that 'YHWH's anger was kindled against Moses' (Exodus 4:14), because Moses kept putting up excuses to avoid carrying out YHWH's mission to redeem Israel from slavery. Now the punishment threatened against anyone who would oppress the poor is expressed in these strong terms (22:23-24):

If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

In the Introduction we noted that attempts to express our understanding of God cannot help but fall short of a mystery that necessarily can never be satisfactorily defined in human words. In the verses just quoted, the authors are accenting the serious obligation of the people to live in a way that is consistent with being a people in a covenant relationship with YHWH, the only true God, the One who has revealed his care for the oppressed. They are expressing in the strongest terms the consequences of failure to honour this covenant, especially in relation to the oppressed.

Their strong sense of justice, and their assumption that God is controlling the world, led them to see God as the dispenser of justice and so as a vengeful God who ensured, through punishment, that those who do evil do not escape the consequences of their action. This is the story of the Flood and of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of the annihilation of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea - to take three obvious examples.

The authors of the Bible were able to fit this picture of God into a description of God as the source of all life and love, a God of tender compassion. We will see more of this shortly. However, we cannot but note the difference between the image of God given here in the text just quoted and the image of God given by Jesus. As we look upon and listen to Jesus, especially to the way he reveals God, we have to make radical adjustments to our way of conceiving the mystery.

Evil matters. The consequences of evil cannot be wished away. But we have come to see God, not as the one who wills the consequences of evil, or uses them as a threat to get conformity, but as the one who continues to pour love into our world, for the salvation of the oppressed and the oppressor. Perhaps the simplest expression of this is when Jesus tried to draw people beyond the kind of image of God represented in the language of God's avenging anger:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

– Matthew 5:43-45,48

¹You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness.

²You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice;

³nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

⁴When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

⁵When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

⁶You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. ⁷Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty.

⁸You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

⁹You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Verses one to three expand on the eighth commandment (20:16) in an attempt to provide extra protection against corrupting court process by giving false testimony

In form and content verses four to five belong to the earlier section of the code and may have accidentally been displaced. Perhaps they were included here because they were seen as an extension of caring for the poor (23:3) by encouraging care even for an enemy. In this they are impressive.

Verses six to seven return to court procedure and are aimed at the judges.

Verse nine is also impressive. YHWH is asking his people to remember who they are, and to treat resident aliens the way God treated them when they were resident aliens in Egypt. If all the peoples of the earth are to find blessing through them, they must reveal God to the world in their manner of dealing with strangers and outsiders.

It is statements such as we find in verses four, five and nine, that find a full flowering in the life and teaching of Jesus.

The tribes of Israel knew their land and its need for 'rest'. The social awareness encouraged by this regulation is clearly influenced by their religious identity as Israelites, worshipping a God who hears the cry of the poor.

Resting on the seventh day is the subject of the third commandment (20:8-11). The focus here is on sensitive care for animals and for those who cannot insist on their rights, lacking clan support.

Verse thirteen reinforces the first commandment (20:3).

Three ancient harvest festivals are given an Israelite colour by the command to assemble in the sanctuary (23:17). The festival of Unleavened Bread (hammaṣṣot) celebrated the beginning of the barley harvest in spring. It was given a historical setting by being linked with the Exodus (12:14-20). The festival of harvest (haqqāṣir) celebrated the wheat harvest in early summer. It was given a historical setting by being linked with the giving of the Law on Sinai. The festival of Ingathering (hā'asîp) celebrated the harvesting of olives and grapes in autumn. The expression 'at the end of the year' points to autumn as the year's end in tribal Israel. At a later stage they fitted in with Mesopotamian practice of celebrating the first month in spring (see 12:2).

This section concludes with three regulations that also concern the cult. The final one is a constant reminder of the need to choose life, not death, and to know the difference. Milk, the life-sustaining force of an animal, should not be mingled with the meat of an animal that has met its death.

¹⁰For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; ¹¹but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

¹²Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.

¹³Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.

¹⁴Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. ¹⁵You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

¹⁶You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.

¹⁷Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord YHWH.

¹⁸You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning.

¹⁹The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of YHWH your God.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

20I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. 21Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. 22But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.

23When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, 24you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.

Their inclusion of the ancient tribal Israelite code now completed, the authors of Exodus insert an exhortation from a much later period. The style and content resemble that of Deuteronomy (see especially Deuteronomy 7:1-5). It consists of a series of promises and warnings that relate to living in 'the place that I have prepared' (23:20). Such is the importance given to these instructions that they are included here as part of the Sinai Covenant. God's encounter with Moses at the burning bush included the promise:

to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

– Exodus 3:8

Moses was instructed to tell the Israelites of YHWH's plans for them (3:17). The promise of the land is linked to the patriarchs:

I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am YHWH.

– Exodus 6:8

The rest of Exodus to this point has been focused on the escape from Egypt and the journey to Sinai, apart from three brief references to the land (12:25 and 13:5,11) and the following statement in the song celebrating the Exodus:

All the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.
Terror and dread fell upon them.
By the might of your arm ...you brought them in
and planted them on the mountain of your own possession.

– Exodus 15:15-17

The Deuteronomistic School, writing centuries after the Canaanites were an issue, create a picture of God commanding their extermination. They present the entrance into Canaan as a conquest, led by their warrior God. This is not history. Archaeology presents a different picture of the emergence of Israel in Canaan, and, thanks to the revelation of Jesus, theology rejects the picture of a God who is 'an enemy to your enemies' (23:22), and who 'blots out' (23:23) the inhabitants of Canaan to make room for Israel. The picture painted by the Deuteronomists is their way of insisting on no compromise in faith. They are also making the point that the land belongs to YHWH and that they, too, will face extinction if they are not faithful to the covenant.

In speaking of the 'angel' (23:20,23) in whom is his name (23:21), YHWH is promising to be with them when they call on him. On the pillars see the commentary on Exodus 34:13.

Verses twenty-five and twenty-six echo the first commandment (20:1-3), and add promises that enlarge on Exodus 15:26.

We are reminded of God being referred to as ‘the Fear of Isaac’ (Genesis 31:42). Fear of YHWH will cause confusion and flight among the inhabitants of Canaan, and ‘pestilence’ will drive them out of the land. See Deuteronomy 7:20, and the commentary on the previous page.

To explain the continuance of Canaanites in the land in spite of God’s promise, verses twenty-nine to thirty are added to explain that the process will not happen all at once, but ‘little by little’ (23:30; see Deuteronomy 7:22).

In Genesis (15:18), the promised land is described as ‘from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’. The ‘Red Sea’ (23:31) refers here to the Gulf of Aqaba, as in 1 Kings 9:28. The ‘sea of the Philistines’ is the Mediterranean. The ‘wilderness’ is the wilderness of Sinai.

Verses thirty-two and thirty-three summarise a key element of the theological reflection of the Deuteronomist (see Deuteronomy 7:4). If the Canaanites are not exterminated by the Israelites (acting with God’s power), religious contagion will lead to infidelity and so divine punishment.

²⁵You shall worship YHWH your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

²⁷I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you.

²⁹I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. ³⁰Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

³¹I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you.

³²You shall make no covenant with them and their gods.

³³They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

¹Then he said to Moses, “Come up to YHWH, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. ²Moses alone shall come near YHWH; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

³Moses came and told the people all the words of YHWH and all the *edicts*; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do.”

⁴And Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

⁵He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as *communion sacrifices* to YHWH. ⁶Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

⁷Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” ⁸Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

We are being prepared for a most solemn moment. Moses’ special mediatory role is again emphasised (see chapter nineteen throughout; also 20:18-21). God is inviting his people into an intimate communion, but ‘Moses alone shall come near YHWH’ (23:2). Even though the priesthood has not yet been formally constituted (see 24:5), Aaron and his two eldest sons (see 6:23), as well as ‘seventy elders’ (representing the seventy families that came down into Egypt?, Genesis 46:27), are invited to draw near, so long as they ‘worship at a distance’ (24:1).

Moses announces to the people YHWH’s ‘words’ (dābār, 20:1-17) and ‘edicts’ (mišpāt, 20:22 - 23:19). Prior to hearing God’s words we were told that ‘the people all answered as one: “Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do”’ (19:8). The people’s acceptance is solemnly repeated here, with special importance given to ‘the words’ (24:3). It is these ‘words’ that Moses commits to writing (24:4).

The covenant is solemnly concluded in a sacrificial rite, which has the same powerful symbolic force as YHWH’s action in having sacrificial animals cut in two as a sign of his commitment to the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 15:10). The same fate will come to anyone who breaks such a covenant (Jeremiah 34:18). Moses casts the blood first on the altar (on YHWH) symbolising YHWH’s absolute commitment to his promises. He then reads out what he has committed to writing (24:4): ‘the book of the covenant’ (24:7). Some read this as including ‘the *decrees*’ (24:3) – hence the name frequently given to the regulations of 20:22 - 23:19. If ‘words’ in verses three and four is meant to include ‘*edicts*’, this reading of ‘book of the covenant’ is appropriate. If, however, the authors are deliberately distinguishing ‘words’ from ‘*edicts*’ (24:3-4), what was ‘written’, and so the ‘book of the covenant’ would seem to apply more appropriately to the ‘words’ (20:1-17) only. The people repeat their commitment and are sprinkled with ‘the blood of the covenant ... in accordance with all these *words*’ (24:8).

The covenant having been concluded in a solemn ritual, Moses and those invited in verse one ascend the mountain, and ‘see’ (rā’â) the God of Israel. The ‘seeing’ is clarified in verse eleven where we are told that they ‘beheld’ (hāzâ) God – a word used for a prophetic vision (see Amos 1:1, Isaiah 1:1). This astonishing intimacy is underlined by the comment that God permitted the leaders of Israel to survive (24:11). They celebrate a covenant meal in God’s presence (compare Genesis 31:46,54; Exodus 18:12). YHWH has entered into an even closer communion with his ‘treasured possession’, his ‘priestly kingdom’, his ‘holy nation’ (19:5-6).

As God’s chosen mediator, Moses has committed God’s words to writing (24:4). In verse twelve YHWH declares: ‘I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law (tôrâ) and the commandment (mišwâ), which I have written for their instruction’. What has YHWH written on the ‘tablets of stone’ that he promises to give Moses? And what is ‘the law and the commandment’ that he has written ‘for their ‘instruction’ (hôrot, from yārâ - the verb from which tôrâ is derived)? We will return to this question in commenting on 31:18.

This is only the second time that Joshua has been mentioned (24:13, see 17:8-16, where Hur, too, was mentioned). Joshua will appear again in 32:17.

From verse fifteen to eighteen, we join the people at a distance as we gaze on God’s holy mountain where Moses is alone with YHWH, hidden from sight by the ‘cloud’ (‘ānān). YHWH’s ‘glory’ (kābôd), appearing ‘like a devouring fire’ (24:17) ‘settles on Mount Sinai’ (24:16). We are being prepared for God’s revelation concerning the tabernacle (miškan - derived from the verb šākan, ‘settle’). Moses is there with YHWH ‘forty days and forty nights’ (24:18). After the water that flooded the earth for ‘forty days and forty nights’ (Genesis 7:4,12), God gave the world a new beginning. What will come of this special time in which YHWH is instructing Moses?

⁹Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

¹²YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of YHWH settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Ratification of the Covenant in the New Testament

Central to the sacrificial ritual that ratified the covenant is recognition of the holiness (transcendence) of God. The Israelites could not think of the mixing of the holy with the ordinary, the mundane (the 'impure'). These must be kept separate. This is why only Moses could approach God. To make something holy (to sacrifice/sanctify/consecrate) is to set it apart from the ordinary. In Exodus 33:7-11 Moses will set up a tent for God, but, of course, it cannot be in the camp. It must be outside the camp in its own place. All except the especially consecrated person (Moses) must keep their distance, as we have seen with the strict command that the people were not to approach God's mountain.

In the New Testament there is a dramatic and revolutionary change. When Jesus asks Peter if he is going to leave Jesus, Peter replies that he has nowhere to go: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'(John 6:69). To grasp the nature of holiness we must, as in all things, look at Jesus. We learn that God 'pitched his tent among us'(John 1:14). No wonder those versed in the law were scandalised when Jesus ate with sinners. They were anxious to not pollute the sacred by contact with the ordinary. Jesus shows that God, the Holy One, wants to come into contact with what is not holy precisely in order to make it so. There is no other way.

The Letter to the Hebrews insists that the ancient sacrifices have been replaced. No longer do we express our desire for a blood-union with God by offering up the life (the blood) from the best of our herd. Jesus has shown us that the offering which God wants is the offering of ourselves (*our* 'blood'). That is what he did. He gave himself for us and he continued to give himself in love even on the cross. Others, for their own motives, wrenched his life from him. But he, even in this desperate place, showed us how to pour forth our life in obedience to God and in love and forgiveness for us. This is the perfect sacrifice:

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant ... Not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you."

– Hebrews 9:15-21

He is referring to the scene we have just examined, and, as was typical of Jewish midrash at the time, he is drawing on another text as well; in this case the ritual of the heifer in Numbers 19. In the passage leading up the one we have just quoted, the author of Hebrews speaks of 'the ashes of a heifer'(9:13; see Numbers 19:10), and uses the expression 'without blemish'(Hebrews 9:14, see Numbers 19:2). And in the text quoted 'he took the blood'(9:19) is from Numbers 19:4; 'scarlet wool and hyssop'(9:19) is from Numbers 19:6; the 'water'(9:19) is from Numbers 19:7. Hebrews goes on to speak of 'sprinkling the tent'(9:21 see Numbers 19:4) and 'the vessels used in worship'(9:21, see Numbers 19:18). The primary focus, however, is on the inauguration of the first 'covenant' and on the Moses' words: 'This is the blood of the covenant' – expressions taken from Exodus 24.

So it is that at the Last Supper, Jesus quotes from the passage we are studying in Exodus, now speaking of the ‘new covenant in my blood’ (1Corinthians 11:25 = Luke 22:20). For us to become holy is to allow God who has now pitched his tent, not outside the camp, but among us – to take over our whole lives and so to purify and sanctify us. Holiness is the communion of the real self with the real God, the liberating God, the God of the Exodus and the Father of Jesus. Since God is love, the Second Vatican Council can write:

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, And so it must be. It is expressed by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.

– Constitution on the Church(Lumen Gentium), n.39

The New Testament is full of calls to holiness. We are to open our hearts, minds and bodies to God who longs to ‘pitch his tent’ within us and among us. No longer are we to be afraid to approach the mountain. God has come into the depths of our hearts and our poor, broken communities. Jesus, the Holy One of God, delights to be with us sinners, for this is the only way we can be encouraged and enabled to let sin go and allow ourselves to be embraced by the Holy One.

We might reflect on the following from the Second Vatican Council:

Christ’s faithful should be instructed by God’s word,
and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body.
They should give thanks to God.
Offering the immaculate victim not only through the hands of the priest
but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves.
Through Christ the mediator they should be drawn day by day
into ever more perfect union with God and each other
so that finally God may be all in all.

– Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), n.48

All their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life,
daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit -
indeed even the hardships of life if they are patiently borne -
all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered
to the Father along with the body of the Lord.
And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions,
the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

– Constitution on the Church(Lumen Gentium), n.34