

When we have catechumens in the parish, we use the “A” readings for the 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent. This year we don’t have catechumens, so we hear about the cleansing of the temple from John’s Gospel.

As members of our Small Church Communities know, the cleansing of the Temple in 3 of the Gospels occurs the day after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem - only 5 days before his death. But this event appears very early in John’s Gospel.

I think that it’s not about where the account appears in any gospel, but more about the message John wants to convey. Jesus will be replacing the ancient Temple rituals with a new covenant - bringing Jews *and* Gentiles into his Father’s family.

This event takes place at the time of Passover, the feast that celebrated the exodus from Egypt and the deliverance from Pharaoh. It was celebrated each year in the spring, around March or April. So it’s appropriate to use this passage at this time of year as we prepare for the great Passover of Easter.

Many people assume that the money changers in this passage are cheating people and that’s why Jesus is upset with them. But as far as we know, the money changers were there to perform a legitimate service - to take the coinage of people who were coming from all over the world, and change it out for the Jerusalem coinage, so that people could buy animals ready to be sacrificed in the temple. And there would have been up to 1 million Jews converging on Jerusalem, many coming from quite a distance.

The real issue seems to be *where* they are doing the selling. Most scholars think that the moneychangers had set up their tables in the outer court of Herod’s Temple - that was the space designated for the Gentiles, so that even pagans could come and worship the God of Israel.

All gospels have Jesus quote from Isaiah: “my house shall be called a house of prayer,” but only Mark adds a key phrase: “for *all* peoples.” These moneychangers are robbing the Gentiles of their ability to pray at the house of the Father. Jesus drives them out because you can’t pray in a noisy marketplace. With his unusually rowdy behavior, Jesus shows us the importance of a sacred space for Gentiles to come and praise God.

The people of Judea - the residents of Jerusalem, especially the chief priests in charge of the temple - ask Jesus for some justification for causing trouble. Jesus answers in the form of a riddle, he says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” And they take him literally to be referring to the temple. They say, “Hold on, it’s taken 46 years to build this temple and you’re gonna raise it up in three days?”

King Herod the Great, the king when Jesus was born, expanded and beautified the second temple and it continued to be under construction during the time of Jesus. From a first century Jewish perspective, the temple was the dwelling place of God on earth. When Jesus identifies himself as the true temple, he’s revealing that he is the dwelling place of God on earth, he is the temple in person.

So this is a revelation of Jesus’ divinity that is a powerful sign pointing forward to his passion, death and resurrection. The disciples themselves didn’t really get the point at the time Jesus spoke. It was as much a riddle to them as it was to Jesus’ opponents. It was only after the resurrection that they made the connection.

All of the sacrifices specified in the old covenant had to take place in the Temple. All of this would be replaced by a new covenant - his institution of the Eucharist which would represent his one, perfect sacrifice on the cross.

All of God’s actions throughout salvation history, from creation to today, are carefully arranged to bring God to communion with us here in the Eucharist. The Mass is the visible sign of his New Covenant with humankind.

Jesus' actions at the Last Supper created this New Covenant. He did this through the offering of a sacrifice shared by those in the covenant family - including us Gentiles.

Jesus instituted this new rite with the Apostles and their successors as ministers of the new covenant. This new form of sacrificial liturgy and divine worship is administered by priests who hold sacrificial office. The sacrament we participate in today is our renewal of that covenant instituted by Jesus. And in today's Gospel, we witness Jesus' actions that showed his concern that even us Gentiles have the ability to come and pray at the house of the Father to renew this covenant.

Jesus' crucifixion on Calvary was a sacrifice that began in the Upper Room as a covenantal offering. This offering of bread and wine made in thanksgiving came to be called the Eucharist.

Right now in COVID times, it might not be an official obligation, but it is our duty to give God what is due to him - the ancients knew this.

But now, we have the words and actions of Jesus to show us how to do this. This sacrament instituted by Jesus was entrusted to his Church, and that brings us to this Eucharist today in this sacred space set apart for this. This pure sacrifice is now offered across the entire planet - from the rising of the sun to its setting - and as Jesus foresaw, it is offered even by us Gentiles. This is how we "keep holy the sabbath."

As a parish, we come together to fulfill this duty. And in this public liturgy, we restate our duty to raise our spirits to the Lord in thanksgiving, as we will in a few minutes, because it is "right and just." Amen?

*With thanks to Brant Pitre and Scott Hahn*

- Deacon Jack Schaefer