

Lent 3

Jesus Clears the Temple – and Clears the Temple of Our Souls

Today's Gospel shines a spotlight on Jesus' transformation of the Covenant. Passover, the high holy day, devout Jews went to the Temple to participate in the annual sacrifice of the lambs that reminded them of their liberation from slavery and death and idolatry in Egypt. The Temple was the meeting place of God with man. The Holy place. Jesus encounters the Temple that Passover as a marketplace with the buying and selling of the animals that will be sacrificed to God. Roman coins were forbidden in the Temple precincts. So the people had to exchange their everyday money for the special Temple currency, with a commission charged, of course.

Jesus challenges this commerce within the Temple grounds with a whip of cords. Not a very terrifying figure – good for driving livestock, maybe - yet somehow very effective! Could His courage and moral clarity have stung the consciences of the greedy who were making money off the worshippers? They knew He was right. In any case, Jesus is miraculously able to cleanse the Temple of all of this noise and profiteering – man's intrusion upon and corruption of the holy things of God. This is how God's covenant had been degraded. (John inserts some of the disciples' later reflections on the way in which the suffering man of God described in Psalm 69(v. 9) prefigured Jesus' zeal for the Father's House.)

The Temple priests demand a "sign" to prove His authority to do this. The only sign, He says, will be: if you destroy "this Temple", I will rebuild it in three days - a veiled reference to His own coming crucifixion and resurrection. They completely miss his meaning and scoff at his claim to be able to rebuild the Temple in three days. After all, the Temple had been undergoing renovations for the last forty-six years!

But there is another level of meaning for us, one that has important implications for you and me. Because, after Jesus ascends to the Father and the Father and Son send the Holy Spirit, the followers of Jesus become His Body. We are the ones who now make Jesus visible in how we live. The believers become the new Temple of God!

Jesus is therefore establishing a renewed Covenant, a new pact between God and the faithful. There is a new kind of temple. The temple is the believers in whom Jesus dwells. The new covenant also means a new way to understanding the Ten Commandments. The old idea was “as long as I avoid ‘the big ones’ I’m pretty much free to do as I please”. Jesus replaces this by giving us a way to see the deeper implications of the Ten Commandments, leading us to an inner transformation through which we can become the living stones of the New Temple. The Lenten season can be understood as a time for “spring cleaning” for our souls, when Jesus is clearing the way for His Spirit to dwell in us more fully!

Today’s Gospel reading ends with the statement that many people began to believe in Jesus during that Passover, but Jesus did not “entrust” Himself to them. That is, He did not in any way rely on their belief to give Him authority or strength, which could only come from God His Father. He understood what is in us, how unreliable we tend to be and how unpredictable. The so-called weakness of God is infinitely stronger than the supposed strength of man! Rely not on your strength to become the Body of Christ, to keep your Temple clear, but on His grace, His strength.