

Homily – March 3rd, 2024 – Third Sunday of Lent



This story of Jesus upsetting the tables of the moneychangers and speaking about destroying and rebuilding the Temple is not only very visual but also is found in all four gospels. John, the gospel writer we heard from today, places the story at the beginning of Jesus ministry while Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it near the end. By

placing it near the end of Jesus' ministry, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are suggesting that this talk and action of Jesus was the last straw for the Jewish authorities. They couldn't hack it anymore; he crossed a line. How dare Jesus suggest their beloved center of worship, the Temple, be reduced to rubble and be rebuilt in three days! This was reason enough, in their minds, to turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities and have him crucified. Later, two false witnesses, at Jesus' kangaroo trial, will report to the high priest that Jesus did, indeed, say that he would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. It's equivalent to claiming to be God which, in their minds, is absolute blasphemy.

However, upsetting the moneychangers' tables and talking about destroying and rebuilding the Temple occurs not at the end but at the beginning in John's gospel. What gets Jesus in trouble at the end of John's gospel--the final line that Jesus crosses to tick the Jewish authorities off--is the raising of a dead man named Lazarus. How dare he claim to have such power! Raising someone from the dead is equivalent to claiming to be God which, in their minds, is absolute blasphemy.

Remember, in last Sunday's gospel about the Transfiguration, Jesus warned the Apostles, as they came down the mountain, not to talk about what they experienced until *after* his death and resurrection. If they could only accompany Jesus through his suffering, death, and resurrection, that, and that alone, would make them credible witnesses to others. He didn't want them to speak

prematurely without having first experienced something. Speaking prematurely-- putting my foot in my mouth—I could write a book about it.

Similarly, nobody fully understood what Jesus could possibly be talking about when he spoke about destroying the Temple and raising it up again in three days. Even though Jesus was talking about the temple of his body, I don't think anyone fully understood this until *after* his death and resurrection. How could they?

Let's look at the Temple. It's more than an historic building; it's a symbol that can say a lot about us today.

The first person wanting to build God a temple was King David. David was allowed to draw up the blueprints, but because David was a man of war, God would not let David build the Temple. David's son and successor, King Solomon, was a man of peace, so God allowed him to build the Temple. So we have the first temple, Solomon's Temple, built around 960 B.C. It gets destroyed by the Babylonians 400 years later and is rebuilt on a much smaller scale in 516 B.C. Five hundred years after that, this second temple is totally renovated by King Herod (started in 19 B.C. and finished in 64 A.D.) bringing it back to the glory it had in Solomon's time. This is the Temple in Jesus' time. Just six years after the completion of the massive renovation of the Temple in 64 A.D., the Romans destroy it in 70 A.D., never to be rebuilt again.

While only a single wall remains of the Temple to this day, it's not totally true to say the Temple was never rebuilt. If, from earliest times onward, the Temple was considered the dwelling place of God, then Jesus is clearly that and more. The first Christians were converted Jews. They saw themselves as Jewish-Christians. As they slowly appreciated the meaning of who Jesus was, his work, his teaching, his dying and rising from the dead—and as they opened to his Spirit—they saw themselves as a “living temple.” The People of God began to see that they themselves as Church had replaced the Temple as the place where God's presence would be manifest. Do we see ourselves as the manifestation of God in the world? We should.

Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets prophesied the coming of a new temple. Perhaps they saw that temples built with human hands would all crumble one day, but a temple built by God's hands and planted in the hearts of believers, would endure forever.

Paul writes these words to the people in Corinth, ***“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?”*** (1 Cor. 6:19). High praise indeed. When he says “you,” apparently he's speaking in the plural. He's telling all the Corinthians—and by extension, all of us—that collectively they form a body, a temple, and that at their core God dwells. Later on Paul will say, when reflecting on the Church as the Body of Christ, ***“There is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free person, no male or female—for you are all one in Christ.”*** According to Paul, everyone has access to the risen body of Christ, the new and eternal Temple. Everyone has access to God.

That was not the case with the physical Temple in Jesus' time. Non-Jews, that is, Gentiles, were only allowed to go so far into the Temple, only as far as the Court of the Gentiles. Warning signs were posted threatening them with death if they went any farther. (Not the kind of welcome you want coming into church). Likewise women could only go as far as the Court of the Women and male Jews could only go as far as the Court of Israel. Only the high priest had access, once a year, to the inner sanctum of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. The understanding was that he alone was worthy enough to be in God's presence.

When Jesus upset the tables of the moneychangers, I think he was doing more than showing his displeasure at the commercialization of faith that took advantage of the poor. I think he was already destroying the Temple and replacing it. This temple business was the cause of Jesus' righteous anger. The physical Temple must go if the “spiritual temple,” which is Christ's body, is ever to come about. He tells the Samaritan woman, “Someday, you will not worship at your temple in Samaria, nor will people worship at their temple in Jerusalem. Someday we will all worship in spirit and truth.”

When Jesus breathed his last breath on the Cross, we are told that the veil in the Temple, which separated the Holy of Holies, “God’s presence,” from the rest of the Temple, tore in two from top to bottom. God was now accessible to all people and not just the high priest. God always was available; they just made that access near impossible.

The moneychangers exchanged, at an exorbitant rate, Roman coins bearing pagan images for Jewish shekels before anyone could enter even the outer room of the Temple. Then the poor were coerced into buying the most expensive lambs or doves convinced they could not win God’s approval without first emptying their wallets. No wonder Jesus acted the way he did. It was the idea that God could only be honored by the proper ceremony, and by enough money. The truth is that God can only be honored by espousing God’s values and living by them. The idea was that the justice of God can be appeased by ritual sacrifice or by any human act. The truth is that sin can only be countered by a change of heart. It is in our hearts that Jesus wants to rule from, not from a cold sanctuary hidden in the deepest recesses of an even colder temple. The temple of God is in the unborn child in the womb, in the suffering people in Gaza and Sudan, in people dealing with Alzheimer’s, in the lonely, in the poor, etc. If we can’t find the presence of God there, a few more tables will have to be overturned.

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