

**3rd Sunday of Lent B (Ex 20:1-17; 1 Cor 1:22-25; Jn 2:13-25) by John H. Howard, C.J.M**

Our reading of Mark's Gospel is interrupted for three Sundays as we read from the Gospel of John. In a way, John answers more directly the question posed by Mark in his Gospel, "**Who is this Jesus?**" John tells clearly who Jesus is and what he will do.

Today's Gospel has two parts. In the first part, Jesus cleanses the Temple of Jerusalem. In the second part, he predicts the destruction and restoration of the temple of his body, his death and resurrection.

Whenever we read from the Gospel of John, we need to remember that everything has a highly symbolic meaning. Nothing is just said in passing. By showing Jesus violently cleansing the Temple, for example, John is not only showing a very human Jesus reacting with anger at the situation he found there. He wants to do more than show Jesus' disapproval of the moneychangers' practices and the commercialism of the sale of animals for sacrifice.

The exchange of Roman coins for Temple coins was a fulfillment of the Law of Moses. The Jewish law forbade the use of graven images, or the picture of persons or animals on anything. Being under Roman domination they had to use Roman coins with the figure of the emperor on it. In order to make offerings to the Temple, pilgrims had to exchange their Roman coins for special Temple coins, or shekels. That name is still used by the modern state of Israel for their currency. Jesus might have been upset at the fact that the money changers charged a fee for this service.

The sale of animals for sacrifice was also a necessary part of the Temple worship. The Jewish law specified that only animals without blemishes could be offered to God. Some merchants had the exclusive contract for the selection and sale of such animals. It was a monopoly, and as any monopoly there was some greed involved. Jesus was certainly upset at the high prices and the profit making of greedy men.

John's message however goes beyond Jesus' outrage at the lack of respect shown the Temple and the profiteering.

By his actions John shows Jesus is challenging the purpose of the Temple and its worship. John is saying that the Ancient Law and its prescriptions, as applied until then, are over. The Messiah has come and his sacrifice will replace all other sacrifices. The Temple needs to be cleansed and will eventually be destroyed marking the end of the Old Covenant.

In the Jewish tradition it was understood that prophets would rise and shock people from time to time. Prophets were not usually subtle; they often made provoking gestures in public. To prove that someone was truly a prophet and not just

another troublemaker, authorities would ask for some proof their mission was from God. That is why the Jewish authorities asked Jesus: "**What sign can you show us for doing this?**" In other words, "**Prove you are a prophet.**" The exchange which follows shows that they were not on the same wavelengths. Jesus says the sign they request will be his death and resurrection. He speaks of the destruction and restoration of the temple of his body, while they, understandably, confused it with the Temple of Jerusalem. The temple will no longer be the place where God dwells among his people. Jesus himself, the risen Lord, will be the body where God's presence will dwell forever. From now on, all our dealings with God will go "**Through Him, with Him and in Him, forever and ever,**" as we pray at Mass. That is why we end all our prayers with the words "**Through Jesus Christ our Lord.**"

This Gospel is an invitation to cleanse our own temple, to review our own way of relating to God. The Temple was the sacred space where one could encounter God. John is saying that no matter where we are, Jesus is the sacred means by which we can encounter God. The quality of our relationship with God depends on our relationship with Jesus, for God was made incarnate through Him.

It is always easier to see how other people's relationships need improvement. We easily see how others misuse or commercialize their religion. We can judge at a glance how others are hung up on rituals. We see the hypocrisy of others who don't live fully according to their stated beliefs. I like that Andy Capp cartoon I once saw. As Andy and his wife are about to enter a church, Andy tries to escape to the pub by saying: "**I'm not going in there; it's full of hypocrites.**" His wife grabs him in by the collar and says: "**One more won't matter.**" (Another story: A man says to one of his close friends "Why don't you ever go to church?" The other answered "The place is full of hypocrites." "One more reason to go, you will feel right at home.")

Cleansing my temple, is cleansing my intentions and my attitudes. That means making my religion a personal relationship with God, not just a set of rules. If I have a personal relationship with someone I should keep in touch, visit, get to know that person better, to care and be cared for. That is what our religion should be. It means to keep in touch with God. It means to make an effort to give of my time to visit his house, the church. It means to read and listen to what he has to say.

So, as we enter the third week of Lent we can ask ourselves what are the steps we have taken to improve our daily contacts with God? We built our relationship with God by building a relationship with Jesus, and we built our relationship with Jesus, as he tells us, by what we do to the lease of his. So it is not complicated, any random act of kindness, any reaching out to others in any form of need, any prayer will lead us there.