

Third Sunday of Lent March 04, 2018

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

The liturgy of the Third Sunday of Lent begins with the acknowledging God's holiness and his claim on us that we belong to him. It recognizes the fact that we are his own people, and must live in a way that reflects his holiness. God offers us the gift of faith as our path towards holiness. At the same time we all want and desire to live a peaceful life in accordance with God's will. We all want to make sense of our existence. We all desire to live a life where we can make a positive contribution to ourselves, to our families and to those around us. Challenges are always with us, difficulties surround us. However the more we long, desire and develop a personal and ultimate relationship with Jesus Christ as our best friend, there is absolutely nothing that we cannot face and overcome. Indeed we become the "power and the wisdom of God". Our first reading tells about the covenant God made with Israel by giving them Ten Commandments to live by. God gave them to Moses so that his chosen people will live by the norms given by him. They had to observe them faithfully in order to live the covenant fully. In the gospel Jesus reacts with anger to abuses in the Temple, which he perceives as the violation of the covenant and shows himself as the Lord of the Temple. He drove the traders out of the Temple and predicted that he himself would be the Temple of the new people of God. In our second reading Paul calls us to embrace divine wisdom though the world may see it as foolishness. He tells them that we preach Christ crucified. He tells them that God's weakness is greater than human strength.

In the first reading we have Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God at Mount Sinai, which became the foundation of Israel's new relationship with God. These commands were the basis of the religious life of the chosen people of the Old Testament. Already God had protected the people in the desert by nourishing them with food and protecting them from enemies. Now he gives them these commandments to protect and build up their spiritual bond with God. Therefore he makes a demand on them that God must come first in their lives before anything else. It is not the unknown God but the one who has revealed his name to them and whom they have promised to hold in total reverence. This is the God who brought them out of Egypt and his love for them was described as Jealous Love. They were not to replace his love with anything else. The created world is God's gift for them and they were to use it for their wellbeing. The people have six

days to work and the seventh day was to be kept aside for God. The remaining commandments flow from a right relationship with God. Fittingly this list begins with a commandment securing honour for Mother and Father, whose love by God's gracious design, brings the next generation into the world. Failure to adhere to this fundamental commandment, so closely associated with God's image and likeness, will jeopardize the people's presence in the Promised Land. The remaining commandments secure respect for all others created in God's image and likeness.

In the Second Reading Paul tells the Corinthian converts that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But for those who are saved, it is the power of God. The message of the cross is the message of love of Jesus that was summarized in two Commandments, namely the love God and loving ones neighbors. Paul tells them that he and his companions proclaimed Christ crucified. He is the power of God and he is the wisdom of God. Paul in fact could not have found a more striking expression for the inscrutable nature of God. He tells them that to the unbelievers, this cross is a stumbling block and a sign of foolishness. It was impossible for them to accept that the Messiah could suffer such an ignominious death at the hands of his own people. They fail to perceive that in Divine love, Jesus took our place on the cross. He died for our sins so we, as children of God, may inherit the Heavenly Kingdom. Those who think they can see are in reality blind. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. For us who are faithful children of God, Christ is our power. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, in our hearts, we perceive the wisdom of God. Jews and Greeks will believe in Christ as the power and wisdom of God only when they allow God's grace to uproot their prejudices. They need to admit that God does not have to live up to their standards.

In today's Gospel Passage John presents the episode of Jesus going to the Temple in Jerusalem during the Jewish feast of the Passover. During this visit he takes upon himself the task of cleansing the Temple. John places this cleansing at the beginning of the Gospel as he commences his ministry rather than at the passion narrative as the Synoptic gospels do. While the Synoptic gospels are probably more historically accurate in this, John's Theology and especially his Christology warrant moving this event to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This event follows the episode at Cana where Jesus had turned water into abundance of wine, symbolizing the abundance of new life he offers to believers. The

cleansing to the Temple demonstrates just how much of a threat to the established religious system Jesus' new life will be. Here John describes the discovery of Jesus in the Temple and his anger when he found people selling animals and exchanging money. For him this was specially his Father's House which is desecrated. Jesus objected not to the trade as such which was quite legitimate but to its being done in the Temple precincts. Such business should have been carried on just outside the Temple area but we know that in our own time hawkers try to get as close to the action as possible, especially if they have to face competition. It is also not at all impossible that the Temple authorities connived at the practice and may have even benefited if the traders had to rent spaces in the Temple to do their business. Making a whip, Jesus drove the animals out and overturned the tables of the money changers.

Surprised by his behavior, the Temple authorities demanded an explanation from Jesus, under whose authority was he performing such a task. Jesus did not respond to their demand directly. He told them that they had to destroy this temple, and in three days he would raise it up indicating the end of the old covenant and its forms of worship. The new covenant is in Jesus' body and the new worship, as Jesus told the woman at the well, is in spirit and in truth. Here Jesus intended to make his claim to be the messiah to be understood by the priests and Pharisees in the Temple. Being blind to the spiritual meaning of the words of Jesus, the people asked how he could do it in three days when the Temple was still under construction after forty-six years of hard dedicated work. They did not realize that Jesus was talking about his own Body, and the glorious Resurrection. Further he tells them finally his very body is the Temple of God. The event itself is a symbolic prophetic action wherein Jesus enters the Temple and physically confronts some money changers and merchants selling animals for the sacrifice in the Temple. John adds details such as the whip which the synoptic gospels do not give. There was nothing illegal in selling animals and exchanging money. That was the service offered by the Temple and it was appreciated by the people. The argument of Jesus is not with these people as such, even though he quotes the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. His action symbolizes his challenge to the whole Temple establishment and the religious system it promoted. Jesus is actually concerned about the sanctity of the place of worship as he is consumed with the zeal for the house of God. According to him this very place of worship has become spiritually bankrupt and is more concerned of all worldly material affairs.

The entire episode would have created a great deal of commotion and this would explain the priests' anger at the actions of Jesus. He was not a rabbi but an ordinary person an upstart before their eyes. They question him about his initiative to do such a thing. In fact Jesus was confronting the entire temple establishment, its authority and its worship with a new authority that totally confounds the Jewish leaders. He points out to them the importance of the house prayer as a special place of worship. He showed them of the importance of their interior disposition towards God whom they chose to worship. They wanted a sign from him but they completely misunderstood what Jesus had done and was speaking about the Temple being his own body. Instead of replying them he told them to destroy the Temple and in three days he was going to rebuild it. In fact he was speaking about his own death and resurrection which they could not understand. Creating a misunderstanding and then clarifying it is a device that John uses frequently. Clarification came when Jesus was raised from the dead and his followers reflected on the cleansing he had done and what he said at that time. We are told that many believed in Jesus as a result of the signs he had done. Still he was skeptical of people who were attracted to him only because of the signs. Attraction to signs is not the same as their faith in Jesus as the messiah and the Son of God.

It was understood that the buying and selling took place in the court of the Gentiles. This meant that well-disposed non-Jews could not pray in peace in the only place allotted to them. They were disturbed by the lowing of the oxen, the bleating of the sheep, the cooing of the doves, the babble of the crowds, the shouts of the hucksters, the haggling over the prices, the dispute about the exchange rates and the rattle of the coins. Now it was this court of Gentiles that Jesus cleansed. In so doing he was making the point to the authorities that the Gentile section was just as holy as the Jewish sections. God is God of all and not God of a select group. All this took place was very legal but against the spirit of the law and it was done in the name of religion. It is no wonder that Jesus, who is normally a cool person, angrily broke the law and swung into action. Here he saw the house of God was desecrated by unnecessary trade and the entire business was degrading the religion. Jesus was moved by pity for the outcasts and the poor, for whom the burdens of injustice were especially heavy. Even with those traders dealing with dove who were poor, he was gentle with them and asks them just to leave and did not scatter their merchandise. The action of Jesus was amazing when one considers the grandeur of the Temple built by Herod and the extent of trade carried out with Priests having a

great say in it. The Temple those days was a religious, social and commercial center of the city.

Certainly, this action of Jesus was an open defiance of the authorities and naturally led to the building of hostilities with them that ultimately sealed his fate. But for Jesus this was the stand he took for religious practices and the need to protect his Father's House. He directly told them that the Temple is primarily the house of God and a place meant for prayer. This had its reaction on his disciples and people standing there. The disciples did not understand the entire event immediately and they could find its meaning only after the resurrection. Yet they did not go away from him nor did they ask him about it. They had the confidence in him as he was their leader and master. As regards with the people he would not trust himself to them because he knew them all. He knew that to many of them he was a wonder-worker or a miracle worker. If he spoke to them of service, or sacrifice, or surrender to God's will, or carrying their cross, they would not have understood and would have left him on the spot. The signs that Jesus gave caused many to believe that somehow God is with Jesus but they failed to see his divinity, that he was the Son of God. To recognize that God is within Jesus, that Jesus is God, would have placed a new understanding of his presence in the world and would have given a new meaning to his preaching the Word. The purification of the temple is a Messianic gesture. Its purpose is to indicate the beginning of the final stage in the history of man's relationship with God.

One of the most frequent accusations of non-believers against religious persons is that they are "hypocritical". More often than not, this is either a case of people justifying their own lack of religious commitment, or of the misconception that they profess their faith because they think they live it perfectly. Nevertheless it is certainly true that an individual cannot please God if he praises him with his lips alone while his heart and mind are far from him. Prayers and devotions are quite useless unless we do what God wants us to do; unless we live in conformity with his plan for our life. When God established a covenant with Israel, he gave them in the Decalogue the blueprint for the basic structure of the edifice. Jesus filled in the details with the Beatitudes, and with all he did and taught. He gave his followers a totally new law, the law of Love. To go through Christ is not exhausted by using liturgical formulas. It's power is only fully unleashed if it defines a person's whole attitude to God and others, and to all the realities of life. Among other things it involves: Giving a

Christ-centered meaning to a person's professional life. The readings of today tell us that we ought to treat everyone around us as we would treat Christ himself. A healthy Christian spirituality, or religious practice, has to respect the way to God that he himself has established.

There once was a wise sage who wandered the country side. One day, as he passed near a village, he was approached by a woman who told him of a sick child nearby. She pleaded him to help this child. So the sage came to the village, and a crowd gathered around him, for such a man was a rare sight. One woman brought the sick child to him, and he said a prayer over her. "Do you really think your prayer will help her, when medicine has failed?" yelled a man from the crowd. "You know nothing of such things! You are a stupid fool!" said the sage to the man. The man became very angry with these words and his face grew hot and red. He was about to say something, or perhaps strike out, when the sage walked over to him and said: "If one word has such power as to make you so angry and hot, may not another have the power to heal?" And thus, the sage healed two people that day.

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