

3rd Sunday of Lent - Cycle B - 2009+
Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25ⁱ

When God gets angry – look out. It must have quite a spectacle seeing Jesus wielding that whip and overturning the tables in the temple. The people must have thought he had gone mad. And he had. He was angry. But just what was it that made him so angry? That is the reflection that the church places before us today.

First it was the celebration of Passover which meant literally thousands of Jewish pilgrims found themselves in the Holy City for the feast. Astonishing as it may sound, it is likely that as many as two and quarter million Jews sometimes assembled in the Holy City to keep the Passover. Many of them, traveling from miles around, would not have had the proper currency for the required sacrifices. The money changers therefore were providing a much needed service. After all, for the proper sacrifice one needed the proper Jewish currency.

Jesus was angry because the money changers were charging exorbitant rates of exchange for this transaction. As a result, pilgrims, who were poor from already having spent a great deal of money to make this religious pilgrimage, were being fleeced by the money lenders. This resulted in such a large sum of money that the Temple treasuries were literally bursting with the dollars being extorted. Much of this money was also being used to "rebuild" or "renovate" the Temple, a process which continued until around the year 60 A.D.

Likewise, those who came to offer an animal sacrifice were being extorted. Traveling a great distance it would have been difficult to bring an animal for sacrifice. Even if they had, it might have been rejected by temple officials as not pure and spotless forcing them to buy an animal on site. It was also well documented that a pair of turtle-doves purchased on the street would have cost a few cents, while one bought in the Temple would have been 15-20 times more. Once again the poor were being extorted by the temple officials. So what enraged Jesus was that pilgrims to the Passover, who could not afford it, were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money-changers. It was a rampant and shameless social injustice -- and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion.

A second reason Jesus was angry was because God's house was being desecrated. In the Temple there was worship without reverence. Worship without reverence is a terrible thing. It may be worship which is so formalized that it becomes empty meaningless ritual. It may be worship in which a leader or congregation arrives completely unprepared to pray. It may be the use of the house of God for purposes in which reverence of God's house is forgotten.

In our Catholic Church, the beauty and the structure of our ritual, which makes it such a powerful and universal form of prayer, can also become a great obstacle to authentic prayer. Rote, repetitious words and actions are rendered meaningless if we are not truly prepared and aware of what these words and actions mean. For instance, each time we enter our church we dip our hands into the holy waters of baptism, to renew and remember our baptismal commitment. In this action we also sign ourselves with the cross, the sign of our salvation.

But how often do we do we really think about what these actions truly mean? We come here because of our baptismal faith in Christ Jesus, who offered himself as the sacrificial lamb, taking away the sin of the world. We are here because we are sinners, and we know we need the saving graces of the Holy Eucharist. If we are not aware of these saving graces which we are about to receive then our worship can become empty and meaningless. These graces will have little or no effect in our lives.

But Jesus had another reason for acting as he did. This reason was not motivated by anger. By this action of cleansing the temple Jesus was teaching us something new. To see this we have to go to Mark's gospel where Jesus says, "*My house shall be called the house of prayer for all nations.*" (Mark 11:17). Jesus, in cleansing the temple, was showing us that his mission was a universal mission. He had come to save, not just Jew, but also the entire world. Because of this he is teaching that our worship must never be exclusive.

The Temple in Jerusalem consisted of several courts leading into the Temple proper and the Holy Place. There was first the Court of the Gentiles, then the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites (men), then the Court of the Priests. Only some of the priests were allowed into the holiest of holy places and so the Temple, by its very structure, kept people from experiencing the fullness of the holiness of God. This further reinforced the Jewish mentality that THEY were the ONLY people to be saved. Jesus, by cleansing the Temple, was saying that he had come to save ALL people, Jew as well as Gentile, men as well as women, priests as well as laity.

Is there anything in our church life - a snobbishness, an exclusiveness, a coldness, a lack of welcome, an arrogance, or a fussiness -- which keeps the stranger out? We must remember the wrath of Jesus against those who made it difficult and even impossible for the stranger seeking God to make contact with God.

So Jesus, in cleansing the Temple, teaches us the importance of authenticity in our faith and our worship. Therefore we must always examine the prayer of our Church and of this worshipping community. We must make sure that our worship is truly authentic; that it never become so automatic and so rote that we lose the depth of awe of being in the presence of God. Furthermore, our worship must never become so exclusive that the stranger does not feel welcome.

Finally, our worship must have its true effect in our lives by cleansing our hearts, for our hearts are the temple of the Holy Spirit. No longer does God dwell solely in a temple made of stone; God now in the temple of the human heart. If we come to this place, but never allow our hearts to be moved with compassion for the poor, the sick, the lonely, the homeless, the unborn and outcasts of our world, then our worship will be reduced to hypocrisy. Therefore we need to examine our own hearts, acknowledging any inauthenticity, snobbishness, exclusiveness, or apathy that may lie there. We need to ask for the grace of God to transform any "coldness" within our hearts to true compassion and mercy for others.

ⁱ Portions of homily edited from Barclay's