

4th March 2018 (Third Sunday in Lent, Year B)

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 18(19):8-11; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25.

Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up!

Today we are faced with a very strange episode in Jesus' life: Jesus walks into the Jerusalem temple and chases away all who were selling animals and changing money. This is the only time when we see Jesus not only getting angry, but also taking physical action; making a whip out of some chord and driving away the animals. What is the meaning of all this?

Animals were an important part of the temple activity. People regularly offered sacrifices of thanksgiving and sacrifices of reconciliation to God; those selling animals played an important role. Perhaps they could have set up their stalls outside the temple rather than on its grounds; what was worse was the way they conducted business. The Law required that the animals offered in sacrifice were without blemish. Often any animals brought from home were declared to be unsuitable by the temple officials; people therefore had to buy 'approved' animals from the temple. Furthermore, it would have been difficult for people travelling long distances to drag along their own sacrificial animal with them, hence the need to acquire their offering from the temple. This gave rise to a type of monopoly and abuse by the merchants in the temple court. Moneychangers were necessary since Roman money was not accepted as an offering at the temple because it carried the image of the Roman emperor, who declared himself to be god! People had to exchange their Roman coins for temple money. It seems that Jesus was angry at the way business was being carried out.

On a deeper level, by removing the animals from the temple, Jesus seems to have been indicating that the time for temple sacrifices had come to an end. With his coming there was no longer any need to offer sacrifices to God; he was the one true 'Lamb of God' and his death on the cross was going to be the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

Another important part of this story is the discussion with the Jewish leaders. Jesus challenges the leaders to: 'Destroy this sanctuary and I will raise it up in three days!' In this discussion two different Greek words are used: the first, *hieron*, refers to the temple as a building, the second, *naos*, can also be translated as dwelling place. While the Jewish leaders are concerned about the building of the temple, Jesus is referring to God's dwelling place. With the coming of Jesus, God no longer needs to dwell in a temple built of stone, but in a temple of human flesh!

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul reminds us that we are temples of the Holy Spirit (3:16;6-19). It is this temple that should concern us more than any stone temple; hence the whole episode takes on a new meaning. Am I turning God's temple into a market place? Have I turned over my whole being to God or to daily human practices? We read this text during Lent because, like Jesus, we too need to be violent with ourselves and ensure that we drive away from our own life anything that does not fit the purpose of this temple.

Fasting that leads to prayer and acts of charity is an important tool in this process. I need to remove from my life all that does not fit into God's dwelling place and instead decorate the sanctuary with new life that reflects the life of God within me. During this Lent have I found more time to reflect on God's Word in my life. The first reading reminds me of the need to consecrate a day of rest to the Lord; do I make space for God in my daily and weekly routines? Do I make space for the presence of God in others, especially those less fortunate than myself.

Fr Mario