

THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, 2018

John 2:13-17

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon is part of our Gospel reading read before, John 2:13-17, that part where Jesus made a whip of cords and drove the people selling animals and the money-changers out of the temple: ¹³ **The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple He found those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as the moneychangers sitting there. ¹⁵ He made a whip of small ropes and drove them all out of the temple, together with their sheep and cattle. He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who sold the doves, “Take these away from here! Stop making My Father’s house a house of merchandise!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that Scripture has said: “The zeal for Your house will consume Me.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus left Capernaum to travel to the Jewish Passover in Jerusalem, where He would commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.¹ All Jewish males 12 years old or older customarily made this pilgrimage at the Passover. The celebration lasted seven days and included the killing of a year-old male lamb, without blemish, for the feast. The participants would recall how the blood of the lamb at the first Passover had spared the firstborn Israelites from the angel of death. Now the very Lamb of God was attending that feast.

As we ponder today on Jesus’ reaction to those who were at the temple as He journeyed to celebrate the Passover, it is helpful for us to know just how the temple and its courts were laid out.

The temple itself was a fairly small building, and very little in the way of actual worship went on in there. It was God’s house – it was where His abiding presence

¹ See Exodus 12

dwelt in the midst of the people – and only specially chosen priests at certain fixed times could go in there to minister before the LORD. Other than that, no one really went into the temple proper. The rest of the temple complex was laid out in a graduated series of courts. It was in these courts where most of the activity at the temple took place.

Surrounding the temple building was the court of the priests. This is where all the sacrifices were offered and burned on the altar – the altar which surprisingly sat outside the temple building. This makes sense because it was used to burn up sacrifices all the time. Only Levitical priests could go onto that court. The idea was that they stood *between* the people and God. Then outside the court of the priests you had the court of Jewish men. The idea was that they functioned as the priests of their own families. Beyond that court was the court of Jewish women. This was as close as women and boys who had not yet reached the age of 12 could get to the temple. Finally, the outermost court was called the court of the Gentiles. It was for non-Jewish converts. That's where anyone who wasn't a Jew could pray and receive instruction in the faith.

We can see two important concepts being reinforced by this general layout of the temple and its grounds. One was the absolute holiness of God. Sinful humans couldn't just walk up into the presence of God. God could only be approached through sacrifice and the mediation of His chosen spokesmen. The other concept was the duty and responsibility of each circle of chosen spokesmen to direct their ministry outward toward those who had to stand farther off. So, the priests had a duty to represent God and His Word to their fellow Jews. Each man was to do that for his family. The Jews *collectively* were supposed to do that for the world at large – all the Gentile nations. In this way God's chosen people were to minister to the world so that God's house would truly be a house of prayer for all people.

That was the idea, but unfortunately, in actual practice, it didn't work out that well. The problem is that the heart of man is so desperately sinful and full of pride. So, instead of realising and seeing their relative proximity to God and His Temple as a ministry of service to those farther out, most people thought of it in terms of status and favour with God. Thus, the priests thought that since they got to be closest to the temple, in the Lord's eyes they were better than the rest of the Jews; Jewish men thought they were better than the women; and all the Jews together imagined that they were better than those Gentile dogs who could come no closer to God than the outermost court.

It was when Jesus arrived at the temple in Jerusalem, coming into the outermost court, the court of the Gentiles, that He found the horrible mess that made Him understandably upset. He found serious distractions from the sacred festival. Instead of seeing Gentiles praying or receiving instruction in the faith, He saw people **selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as the moneychangers sitting there**. Some were selling animals and birds for the sacrifices, while others would change money for the foreign visitors, who needed to pay their temple tax with a specified Jewish coin.² It was like some kind of large market day. You can just imagine how much noise and confusion there must have been, and how those vendors would have exploited the people, all in the name of their greed. Reverence played the pauper. The practice subverted the worship purpose of the temple. Many surely came with sacrifices not pleasing to God because their hearts were not with God.³ Surely the Gentiles could not worship and hear God's Word while all this was going on.

The temple itself was to be a place of worship and prayer, not a marketplace for doing business, and I'm sure that the Jews knew that – at least at first. When they first built the temple and laid out its courts, no one would have imagined using the outer court for selling merchandise. They would have thought it sacrilegious, so all such business would have taken place *beyond* the temple precincts. But you know how things go over time. Businessmen would have wanted to set up shop as close to the temple gate as possible for greater convenience of their customers and therefore the best sales. Perhaps you can picture in your mind an enterprising seller of goats in an unfavourable location walking around with a goat on a leash, looking for a sale. When they figured out what was going on, the competition would have followed suit. Pretty soon you'd have any number of under-the-table sales going on in the temple. Maybe worshippers would see what was happening, and know that it wasn't proper, but few would have been brave enough to report it – besides, it was only going on in the court of the Gentiles - it's not like it was interfering with their worship.

All this business going on in the temple court didn't just happen overnight. It was a case of gradual encroachment that perhaps took place over a period of time. As such, the opposition it should have provoked among God's people never really materialised because the offense came just a little bit at a time. It's like that proverbial frog sitting in the water being slowly heated on the stove. He doesn't realise he's in trouble until

² Exodus 30:13-16

³ Isaiah 1:11-17; Hosea 8:13; Psalm 51:16

he's already been cooked. In the same way, the people who really should have known better became gradually accustomed to it, and said to themselves, "*Well, it isn't right; but it's the way things are. Besides, it's not bothering me and there's nothing I can do about it.*"

That attitude, however, was not shared by Jesus. He saw *two* glaring problems: First, that the sacred precincts were being used for non-sacred purposes. He noticed that the business of the world was taking precedence over the business of the temple, which was hearing God's Word, worship, and prayer. Second, He saw the Gentiles were being crowded out of their only true access to God. When Jesus saw these things, it made His blood boil. ¹⁵ **He made a whip of small ropes and drove them all out of the temple, together with their sheep and cattle. He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables.** ¹⁶ **He told those who sold the doves, "Take these away from here! Stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise!"**

Seeing this stampede of terrified merchants and animals fleeing in every direction before Jesus, the disciples, knowing the Scriptures, recall one of David's Psalms⁴ that speaks of the Messiah: "**The zeal for Your house will consume Me.**" They see this passage come alive in Jesus and His passionate devotion to keeping the temple the sacred place it's supposed to be. It is an attitude of jealousy – an appropriate kind of jealousy, like we heard the LORD speak of in our First Reading for today, when He said that He is *a jealous God*, (Ex. 20:5). The idea is that He will not share the glory due His name with any other. Nor will He, as we see in this case, allow that which is holy, that is, that which has been set aside for God and His sacred purposes to be used for unholy or common purposes. No merely practical concerns or conveniences are to interfere or compete with God's reaching out to *all people* with His Word and His invitation for them to come to Him for His grace and forgiveness.

Thinking now of our own church, if Jesus was to come up to us as He did to the temple in Jerusalem in His day, what would He see? Would there be anything that would compel Him to make a **whip of small ropes** and drive us out? Are there any offenses that our eyes are so accustomed to seeing that we really don't see as being a problem? Do we sometimes make compromises in the name of being practical, or because it's good business, or because we haven't got the courage to stand up and say, "*You know, this just isn't right*"? Do we sometimes think we need to change the way

⁴ Psalm 69:9

we do things, in order to build up the church? Modernise our liturgy, be more lax with our communion practice, or water down our doctrines to make people feel more comfortable. I wonder if we don't sometimes feel that we should do things *our way* – whatever it is – instead of God's way. Maybe we sometimes forget that this is God's house, and as such it deserves to be treated with due reverence and respect. I wonder too in what ways we might deliberately or even inadvertently misuse this space to keep the Gentiles at bay, by which I mean the very people we should, from our privileged position, be ministering to with God's Word.

But then, I'm only talking about a building – a building that will one day collapse in dust never to rise again. Sure, this is holy ground, and we ought to treat it as such. But even more important for our consideration this morning is the temple of our bodies.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body,*” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Through the working of the Holy Spirit each and every one of us who believes in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a temple of God. The Lord lives in us, and now, during the season of Lent in particular, we are to be about the task of clearing that temple. Therefore, the question must be asked: As Jesus comes into you this day, what does He find that does not belong? What would Jesus drive out of your heart and from your mind today? What gradual compromises or corruption or prideful thoughts or unholy desires does He want to force out of you with a **whip of small ropes** if need be, saying, “*Get this out of here! How dare you bring this into My Father's house?*” In what ways have you allowed your personal affairs and interests to interfere with your ministry to the people God has given you to serve? Since we see how zealous He was for a building of stone that was destroyed a few decades after His ascension, how much more do you think He is zealous for you and your body that He now inhabits and that He will one day raise from the dust to be His temple forever?

His zeal for the temple of your body consumes Him – literally. He didn't shed His holy blood for a building in Jerusalem. Nailed to the cross He was raised up in agony and He was consumed – totally destroyed – by God's wrath against sin for you. That's how zealous and passionate He is for His temple which you are. That's what He did to make you His holy temple, to cleanse you of all your sin, and to make you a vessel for His service through which He can minister His grace and forgiveness to others.

Today, as He comes into us He bids us to clean our house, to see with His eyes what does not belong in here, and to act with His zeal to drive it out. In order to make that

happen, He gives you Himself, His body and His blood to be consumed by you that you might be cleansed and re-consecrated as His holy temple – a place of service for Him in time and eternity.

May He give us the grace to hear and believe the words He has spoken, that zealously cleaning His house we may be holy and useful temples for Him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord God, heavenly Father, limitless in love, and perfect in power, receive our worship and praise. Our eyes always turn to You, for without You there is no help, and with You there is no danger. Be the guardian and defender of all who lift up their hearts to You, of all who seek Your help in times of need.

We confess that we fully deserve Your wrath for breaking Your holy commandments. Therefore we thank You for Your great love in Jesus, who in His compassion and grace sacrificed Himself for our sins. With grateful hearts we praise You for His finished work: His holy life, His blessed example, His gracious teaching, His loving companionship, and His atoning death, and the place in Your kingdom that He has won for us.

Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may follow the example of Jesus, and walk in love. Grant that, as Your children, we may continue to repent of our sins, give up the ways of darkness and error, and walk in paths that are good, righteous, and true. Fill our lives with holiness, with love of Your Word, and with every grace and virtue.

Prosper and protect the work of Your Church. Give success to all who proclaim the glorious Gospel of salvation. Give conviction and faithfulness to all Your people, that they may work with zeal to gather in the harvest of Christ's redeemed people.

Rule and direct our government. Give wisdom and integrity to all in our police and armed forces, that our nation may be kept in peace, and that righteousness and justice may hold sway everywhere.

We pray for all in any need of body or soul, for all loved ones in distant places, for all who have strayed from Your truth, for all who are in temptation, for all who are suffering sickness and pain, and for all who mourn. Bless and help them according to their need. Hear their prayers. Comfort them with Your presence.

Unite in one spirit through the truth all in Your Church on earth, and finally bring us to Your joys in heaven. We pray for these things in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Exodus 20:1-17

¹ Then God spoke all these Words: ² “I am the LORD, your God, and I have brought you out of slave-quarters in the land of Egypt. ³ You shall have no other gods before Me! ⁴ You shall not make a carved image for yourself, or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth! ⁵ You shall not worship them or serve them! For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God. I punish the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me. ⁶ However, I show mercy for a thousand generations to those who love Me and keep My Commandments. ⁷ You shall not use the name of the LORD, your God, in a wrong way! For the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who uses His name wrongly. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy! ⁹ For six days You shall labour and do all your work! ¹⁰ However, the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD, your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your cattle, or your foreign resident, who is inside your gates! ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and

everything that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD has blessed the Sabbath day and has declared it holy. ¹² Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged in the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you! ¹³ You shall not murder! ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery! ¹⁵ You shall not steal! ¹⁶ You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour! ¹⁷ You shall not desire your neighbour’s house! You shall not desire your neighbour’s wife, or his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbour!”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For Scripture says: “I shall destroy the wisdom of wise people and frustrate the intelligence of intelligent people.” ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For, since the world by its wisdom has not come to know God, God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for miraculous signs and Greeks look for

wisdom.²³ However, we preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness;²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ For see what you were, fellow-Christians, when God called you! Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were influential, and not many were born of noble parents.²⁷ However, God has chosen the foolish things in the world to put those who are wise to shame. God has chosen the weak things in the world to put those who are strong to shame.²⁸ God has chosen the lowly things in the world, the things that are despised, and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before God.³⁰ However, you are from Him in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, holiness, and redemption,³¹ so that it may be as Scripture has said, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord!"

John 2:13-25

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹⁴ In the temple He found those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as the moneychangers sitting there.¹⁵ He made

a whip of small ropes and drove them all out of the temple, together with their sheep and cattle. He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables.¹⁶ He told those who sold the doves, "Take these away from here! Stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise!"

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that Scripture has said: "The zeal for Your house will consume Me."

¹⁸ So the Jews spoke up and asked Him, "What miraculous sign do you show to us, seeing that You are doing these things?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple! I shall raise it in three days."

²⁰ Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it in three days?"

²¹ However, He was speaking about the temple of His body.²² Therefore, after He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the statement that Jesus had made.

²³ While He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw His miraculous signs, which He was doing.

²⁴ However, Jesus Himself did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people,²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify about man. For He knew what was in man.