

Third Sunday of Lent (B)

March 3, 2024

My dear friends, today's readings from the Holy Scripture teach us that Lent is the ideal time to clean out the Temple of our own hearts and to offer to God proper Divine worship by obeying the Ten Commandments. Our first reading teaches us that the Ten Commandments are the basis for our religious and spiritual life. Instead of restricting our freedom, the Commandments really help us to love and respect our God and our neighbors.

The second reading reminds us that we must appreciate the Divine "foolishness" of the crucified Lord and obey His commandment of love as our expression of Divine worship. Today's Gospel gives us the dramatic account of Jesus' cleansing the Temple of its merchants and moneychangers, followed by a prediction of his death and Resurrection.

**"Destroy this temple and in three days
I will raise it up."**

It's a fact that Jesus said a lot of wild things during his public ministry. He told parables that sometimes were more confusing than clear. He made statements that described a kingdom that seemed to work the opposite of the way most people thought the world worked.

He challenged people to do things and believe things and embrace things that seemed to be impossible. Over time, those who knew him the best probably got somewhat used to it. But some still felt the need to ask him for explanations whenever he said something that didn't make much sense.

Today, in the Gospel passage from St. John, we hear one such situation playing out. Some present in the temple area were pushing Jesus to do something miraculous. (This was after his scolding of some money changers. I wonder what they thought about that!) And while Jesus

doesn't just "perform" a miracle on command, he tells them what he has the power to do.

**"Destroy this temple and in three days
I will raise it up."**

This might be one of the most outrageous statements Jesus ever made. After all, the people had been working on the building of the temple for decades. And instead of just letting it go, they press him for explanation. Jesus doesn't disappoint. But what he says is even more outrageous than his first claim. Jesus, doing what he often did, had been engaging in a sort of wordplay with them. They had assumed that he was talking about the building they were all looking at. But he wasn't.

He was talking about his body.

No one present would ever have done such a thing, nor would have even believed such a thing could be true. The temple was a holy place, in fact the holiest. Was Jesus saying HE was as HOLY as the temple, the "place" where God dwelled? You bet he was.

It's a beautiful image when you really think about it. And what's even more beautiful is that it is not a term that only rightfully applies to Jesus. It's also a term the Church uses to describe our own bodies - yours and mine - the ones we see in the mirror every day and wonder disappointedly, "What happened?"

Most of us don't like our bodies. Some of us don't really like ourselves. And many of us aren't sure that we are capable of doing the things God is asking of us, some are certain that our faults and limitations and weaknesses would make true faithfulness an impossibility. I'm a temple? That's kooky talk. But it's true. It's a fact.

Of course, not exactly in the same way as it is true for Jesus. After all, he is God and we are not. He is perfection and we are not. He is the Savior of the world and we are not. Yet, the term applies nonetheless.

It applies because:

God created us, and that means we are good no matter what we do or don't do.

God made us in his image and that means we have a dignity which we can never forfeit.

God loves us beyond all measure and so even the seemingly impossible from us is possible.

And Jesus promised to send his Spirit which means that God does indeed dwell within each of us and in every person open to his grace.

In other words, we were created a certain way, for a certain purpose, with God-given dignity, and to be holy, that is, be people who embody and share with the world every good thing - kindness, mercy, generosity, compassion, love, you name it. And when we see ourselves that way, we'll see the Ten Commandments in a new light. No longer will they just seem like "rules" imposed from "outside". Rather, they will seem like deep truths, truths that simply articulate who we are at our core, exactly who we were created to be, that is, what is most "real" and "authentic" in each of us.

Put simply, living out the Ten Commandments is each one of us living in a way that's consistent with who we are in the deepest sense. And living that way, my dear friends, is entirely possible. That is our calling. That is what will make us happy and fulfilled. And that is both a challenge and a promise coming from our God who isn't far away, but is closer than we could ever think of or imagine.

A temple? Jesus was a perfect one. No doubt about that. May we also strive to be the best temples we can be, trusting that God will raise us up too.