

Third Sunday in Lent (B)
March 8, 2015.

'Zeal for your house will consume me' (Jn. 2:17)

The Gospel records something uncharacteristic: the anger of Christ our Lord. It is a righteous anger, born of our Lord's zeal for the House of the Lord. *Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!* (Jn. 2:16). The cleansing of the Temple as this incident is often referred to, effectively speaks to the nature and purpose of worship and by extension, places of worship, a church. At an even deeper level, this event speaks to a fundamental aspect of the human personality. The human person is naturally religious because we are self-transcending beings. It belongs to our nature to ask questions that take us beyond the here and now. We ask *why* and *to what end?* These questions take us outside ourselves. These questions are definitively answered by God Himself who through His revelation has raised us up to glory for He offers us what we do not possess by nature, friendship with Him. This friendship, like all friendships is nurtured by conversation and our conversation is prayer. What we are about, literally *here* and *now*, is *serious conversation leading to blessed communion* (Walter Brueggemann). This is the purpose of worship and this may help us to understand our Lord's anger: *Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!* (Jn. 2:16).

All four Gospels record the cleansing of the Temple. There is general agreement that the cleansing took place in the *Court of the Gentiles* or the outer court of the Temple. The New Testament uses two different words for temple: (*Naos*) one for the temple proper, the Sanctuary, where the priests did their work, which included the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant had once been; and another word (*hieron*) to refer to the outer temple which surrounded the Sanctuary (*naos*). A Catholic Church building is traditionally also likewise delineated: the Sanctuary proper where the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, and the church building that surrounds and leads to the Sanctuary.

What exactly did our Lord find objectionable, since those selling cattle, sheep and doves as well as the money changers were providing a legitimate service for pilgrims to the Temple? The Temple tax that had to be paid by any adult male over the age of twenty had to be made with a Jewish coin. Hence the money changers were needed for those coming from elsewhere; and the availability of sacrificial animals was also convenient and necessary. Buying and selling at all however, was totally out of place in the Temple and this was what brought our Lord's anger upon them. There was a stated purpose to the outer court or the Court of the Gentiles and a veritable marketplace (the Greek of the NT uses the word *emporion* – emporium) was not it. As its name indicates, the Court of the Gentiles and Pagans (*atrium gentium*) was a space that everyone could enter and remain in, regardless of culture, language or religious profession. In addition to the areas reserved to the Jewish people (men, women, priests), this space which was accessible to everyone was a place where the rabbis and the teachers of the law gathered, ready to listen to people's questions and to respond to these questions. Its intended purpose was vitiated, corrupted even. It was not intended as a place for commerce. Imagine if our church, a sacred building consecrated for worship were used as a meeting hall or if a dining room were used as a mud room.

St Irenaeus explains that like an architect, God *outlined the plan of salvation to those who sought to please Him.... To those who were restless in the desert He gave a law perfectly suited to them.... In so many ways He was training the human race to take part in the harmonious song of salvation...He established a law for the people governing the construction of the tabernacle and building of the Temple, the choice of Levites, the sacrifices, the offerings, the rites of purification and the rest of what belonged to worship.... He kept calling them to what was primary by means of what was secondary, that is, through foreshadowings to the reality, through things of time to the things of eternity, through things of the flesh to the things of the spirit, through earthly things to the heavenly things* (From the *Treatise Against Heresies, Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. II, p. 177-178*). What is primary? What is ultimate reality? What is eternal and spiritual and heavenly? These questions have only one answer: *Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24)*! This is our proclamation always and everywhere. *We preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23)*. We adore Christ the Son of the Living God and through Him, and with Him and in Him we *take part in the harmonious song of salvation*. This is our worship and anything that detracts or distracts from this is neither worthy of God, nor of divine worship, nor of our efforts to grow in His friendship.

But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him (Jn. 4:22-23). This is why we have come to this temple, a consecrated and sacred edifice that foreshadows the Heavenly Jerusalem. We are here *at the Saviour's command*, to be *formed by divine teaching*. Our Gospel text challenges each of us, especially during this Lenten season, to examine our own dispositions as we seek to know and to worship the living God. When there is no confusion about the nature and purpose of a given activity or task, what is undertaken is both purposeful and delightful even. The nature and purpose of our worship is twofold: we are here to adore the living God who shares His life with us, and to deepen our life in Christ through our prayerful dialogue with Him, expressed through the living word that is proclaimed and explained, through sacred hymns and canticles and through ancient rites expressive of the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty. We are here to participate in the *harmonious song of salvation*. In mystery we participate already in the heavenly liturgy, the blessed communion of those who love and serve the living God in Christ. *Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'* (Rev. 5:12)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ew8ig612NQc>