

Our True Dignity Revealed Through Cleansing

March 7, 2021, Third Sunday of Lent

Gospel of John 2:13-25

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The account of the *Cleansing of the Temple* appears in all four Gospels. In the synoptic Gospels; that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels, this account takes place toward the end of Jesus ministry and before he is arrested.

In John's Gospel however, it appears in chapter 2 near the beginning. In fact it appears right after the *Wedding at Cana* which is at the beginning of Jesus ministry.

It is generally accepted that the synoptic Gospels are closer to historical fact in the way the events are presented. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the *cleansing of the temple* account appears very shortly after the *triumphant entry into Jerusalem* which we celebrate on Palm Sunday.

In Mark's Gospel, only the *cursing of the fig tree* occurs between the *triumphant entry into Jerusalem* and the *cleansing in the temple*.

In Luke's Gospel, only the account of *Jesus weeping for Jerusalem* occurs between the *triumphant entry into Jerusalem* and cleansing in the temple.

But in John's Gospel, which we hear today, the cleansing of the temple is presented almost at the *beginning of Jesus ministry* and in a much more colourful and descriptive way.

Only in John's Gospel does Jesus make a *whip of cords* to chase out the money changers. His graphic description of Jesus driving out of the temple not only doves for sacrifice but larger livestock that is cattle and sheep provides more imagery than the other gospels.

It also adds that Jesus was asked *what sign he could show them for doing what he did.* And Jesus responds by saying '*destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*' And then it goes on to explain how at the time, the people misinterpreted this as referring to the physical temple building when in fact he was referring to the temple of his body - - and that it was the disciples who recalled this after Jesus had been raised from the dead.

And finally John's Gospel adds that '*Jesus, on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about human nature, for he himself knew what was within the human person.*' Here, *Jesus' humanity* and His understanding of it are affirmed.

The *divine nature* of Jesus is very clear in John's Gospel right from the beginning. In John, the *cleansing of the temple* account asserts the reality of **Jesus' person** as

being **the Saviour** and **not the temple building**, nor the religious systems or institutions but Jesus himself, the person, who is the Son of God.

The message here is that all that has been sacrificed in the past to God by Jewish practices and traditions culminates with the sacrifice of Jesus Himself, the Son of God to the Father on behalf of all humanity. Jesus himself replaces, one by one, all of the major Israelite institutions. His life, death, and resurrection definitively fulfill the meanings of temple, feasts, and Torah.

John's Gospel proposes Jesus as the Holy One, a concept which was hard for the Jews to hear and believe - - that one person could take the place of the holy temple of God and all their traditions.

What about Jesus' anger? There is a physical violent aspect. One might ask how does this reconcile with His commandment of turning the other cheek? This stands out from the gentle teaching of Jesus who heals and demonstrates such deep mercy and compassion.

In cases where turning the other cheek would make your enemy worse instead of better, loving your enemy requires helping them to stop their evil ways in some other way than turning the other cheek. (eg in domestic violence). Enabling bad behaviour helps no one. And that may mean a form of admonishment or reprimand or a response that may be harsh to the person being scolded and likely would not look pretty to any onlookers (tough love).

And for Jesus, to ignore the evil ways of the moneychangers who would be self-interested cheaters taking advantage of the vulnerable, it would have been more enabling than helpful to allow it to continue. Jesus uses force to get them to stop. This may remind us that sometimes God may seem harsh and demanding out of love for us.

The 10 Commandments (just the word *commandment* has a coercive tone to it) tell us what to do and what not to, but they also shed light on **where we are not doing so well**. We don't necessarily want to hear that because in our pride, there remains a part of us that does not like to be told what to do. Lent is a time to face more directly where we are not doing so well, and where we need to acquiesce to accepting instruction and practice the discipline that goes with the spiritual life.

And yes, we have the 10 Commandments but now our best instruction manual is Christ himself.

Remember the commandments are not meant to frighten us into submission but to invite us into a richer more orderly life.

As a kid, I was not crazy about Lent. The image I had was that it was burdensome and heavy on the extra rules and I knew I would feel guilty if I didn't comply. (a kind of a negative image)

But there is a healthier more spiritual and life giving approach.

During Lent we pray for the desire to overcome our sins by prayer, fasting, and the works of mercy. Fasting puts us in touch with our selfishness which happens to be attractive and demanding. It helps bring out into the open that *dignified self* which is not ruled by delights of all kinds. Fasting as a prayer is not a subtraction or giving up but the receiving of a delightful truth. We are humans, we have *drives*, and *instincts* and *tastes*, *fears*, and *shoulds*, to which we **do not** have to respond. WE ARE LEARNING TO LIVE BEYOND OUR IMPULSES and accept who we truly are before God. God knows we are sinful, but He desires to work with us on the ongoing road to holiness.

So, once again, Lent is the time for ***letting God get our attention*** and if He gets our attention, we will hear of the holiness of God, holiness of all life, and especially holiness within ourselves more clearly. Lent has its part to play ***as we work at cleansing our temples***. And in that cleansing, may we come to see and experience as Paul says, the *wisdom of the Cross* over the foolishness that the world sees and then ultimately experience the joy of the resurrection. In this Eucharist, we welcome His life into ours more fully - - into our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. Amen