

Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent

March 7, 2021

Note: I want to thank Father Geoff Kerlake for generously offering to celebrate the Saturday 5:00pm Mass in my stead. The homily below is not the one he preached, rather it is mine.

The Feast of the Passover was the most important of all the Jewish feasts celebrated each year. All males within about 25 kilometres of Jerusalem were required to make an annual pilgrimage to the Temple. Others from further distances and distant lands often made the pilgrimage as well, if not regularly at least once in their lifetime. Because of this Jerusalem would be filled with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who had traveled there to worship.

It would be impractical for most of these travelers to bring an animal for the sacrifice. Consequently, they had to buy animals locally. There was also the Temple tax that needed to be paid. And only the shekel was accepted. So, people with different currencies had to exchange their money to pay the Temple tax.

These were practical matters that needed to be taken care of. The problem was where and how these were done.

At the Temple was the Court of the Gentiles. It was the large outer court where pious non-Jews were allowed to enter and worship. But what they found was an area filled with people selling animals and changing money. It was like a huge flea market! How could worship go on amidst such noise and distraction?

And that was not the only problem. Those selling animals and exchanging money did so at exorbitant rates, gouging the pilgrims in order to make a hefty profit for themselves.

Jesus was angered at these irreverent and opportunistic practices that made a mockery of the Temple's sacred function and exploited the faithful who had come to God's house to worship. And so, in one of the most dramatic and startling scenes in the Gospel Jesus' response is described: "Making a whip of cords, He drove all of them out of the Temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making My Father's house a marketplace!'"

Two immediate reactions to this incident are recorded in John's Gospel. First was that of His disciples, who remembered the words of the Psalm, "Zeal for Your house will consume me" (69:9). This text was commonly understood as applying to the Messiah.

Then there were those Jews who demanded a sign from God that Jesus had the authority to do what He did. To them Jesus responded: "Destroy this Temple, and in

three days I will raise it up.” This, of course, was a prophecy about His own death and resurrection.

But this short statement also revealed that Jesus’ body was the new and greater Temple. For it is in Him that the fullness of God dwells amongst His people. He is the epicentre of God’s presence on earth.

Saint Paul would draw out the implication of this truth as it applies to us. If Christ’s Body is the Temple and we are members of His Body, the Church, then we too are temples. “Do you not know,” says Saint Paul, “that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16).

So, God now dwells amongst us in Christ Jesus and in us by the Holy Spirit. But isn’t that what we already confess when we refer to ourselves as members of “the Body of Christ”? What extra insight do we gain from Jesus referring to Himself as the “Temple” and Saint Paul referring to us as “God’s temple”? To answer that we need to ask: What was done at the Temple?

The Temple was the central place of worship for the people of Israel. And the essence of Temple worship was the offering of ritual sacrifice to God. In order to have ritual sacrifice there are some essential elements. Take away any one of these elements and you no longer have a formal sacrifice.

First, you need a sacred space from which to offer the sacrifice; a place set apart for reverently approaching God. Second you need an altar on which to offer the sacrifice. Third, you need a priest to offer the sacrifice. Fourth, you need a victim to be the sacrifice. And finally, you need God to accept the sacrifice.

Now consider what happened when Christ was on the cross. All of the elements of ritual sacrifice were present. There was the sacred place, the Temple that is Jesus Himself, God made man dwelling amongst His people (see Jn 1:14). There was the altar of the cross on which He was sacrificed. The priest offering the sacrifice was Jesus Himself, “having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:10). And Jesus was also the sacrificial victim: “Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1:36) testified John the Baptist. Finally, God accepted the perfect self-offering Jesus made for the forgiveness of our sins and our reconciliation with the Father. “Through [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:20).

Let’s go further. We too are temples – sacred places where God dwells – by virtue of our Baptism. We too are called to make our lives an altar of sacrifice: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Mt 16:24). We too share in Christ’s priestly function: “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-9). Our

lives too are meant to be a sacrificial offering to God: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

We are a temple of the Holy Spirit and the way we live our lives is the offering we make to God. So, this Lent let us renew our desire to make our lives a fitting offering that is pleasing to God. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).