

DEDICATION OF ST. JOHN'S AT THE LATERAN, 2025

Today we hear from St. John's Gospel about the cleansing of the Temple. In the course of this Gospel, John 2:13-22, we encounter two different meanings of that word "Temple", both the physical building in Jerusalem and the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth. The first reading from chapter 47 of Ezekiel gives us a third meaning of that word "Temple." In chapter 47 of Ezekiel, the Prophet is not shown the physical Temple in Jerusalem, in ruins after the City's sack by the Babylonians, he was shown a heavenly Temple, a symbol of Heaven's invisible and spiritual worship. In today's Second Reading, we are given yet another meaning of that word "Temple," the visible body of baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

So, today we have four meanings of the word "Temple." God's Temple is:

1. The building in Jerusalem in which the worship of the Old Covenant was offered, of which now only one part of one retaining wall remains.
2. The Body of Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried, raised from the dead, and ascended into Heaven, the Body Whose offering to God is the supreme worship of the New Covenant.
3. The assembly of the angels and saints in Heaven, who live in God and in whom God lives, who forever offer God perfect praise and thanksgiving.
4. The assembly on earth of baptized believers in Jesus Christ, who said "wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst." In this assembly, God is offered earthly praise and thanksgiving.

The first point of this Gospel passage is that God's work on earth is not truly focused on a sacred building, but on the divine Person of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, Second Person of the all holy Trinity, Who truly assumed human nature. As true God and true Man, since the moment He was conceived as Man in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and He alone is the focus of all that God does in this world. If anything is truly from God, it comes, directly or indirectly, through Jesus Christ. A statement of mine to that effect in seminary once caused some consternation. Are you saying that non-Christians can't be saved? No, actually. I do not know the full mind of Jesus Christ or all the ways in which He works in the world. I am saying that, if non-Christians are saved, they are not saved through any prophet, sage, wonder worker, holy man, or leader, but only through Jesus Christ, sacrificed for the sins of all Humanity and raised for the life of all Humanity. He, as true God and true Man, is infinitely more worthy of being God's Temple than that old building in Jerusalem was. Strictly speaking, the sad remains of Jerusalem's Temple are only of historical interest to Christians, for whom the Body of Jesus Christ is God's true and perfect Temple on earth.

The second point of this Gospel passage is that the Temple, as God's House, needs to be cleansed. In the time of Jesus, that had a quite specific meaning. All who wished to offer a Temple sacrifice had to purchase an animal in the Temple's outer court from the Temple's vendors. Having a monopoly on sacrificial animals, the Temple charged an inflated price for them, infuriating Jesus of Nazareth. Further, all Jews had to pay a tax to support the Temple. It was a modest tax, but it had to be paid in properly Jewish coins, without the head of the Emperor on it. Temple authorities made the claim, with which Jesus of Nazareth disagreed, that the image of the Emperor made Roman coins unfit for the sacred purpose of the Temple Tax.

Before the Temple tax could be paid, Roman coins had to be exchanged for Temple coins. The Roman coins had significantly higher silver content, which meant that the Temple made a profit on the exchange. The worship of God was being made a business operation! Again, Jesus of Nazareth was furious. The Temple needed to be cleansed.

For us, of course, the old Temple is irrelevant, and the Temple that is the Body of Jesus Christ is perfectly pure. Consider, however, that meaning of “Temple” that we find in the Second Reading, the assembly of all baptized believers in Jesus Christ. Do I bring dirt with me when I come to this sacred assembly (most sacred when it is celebrating the Holy Eucharist)? Do you bring dirt with you when you come to this sacred assembly? In the outer court of Jerusalem’s Temple Jesus found noisy animals and legally corrupt merchants (they were exploiting God’s People, but weren’t breaking any laws!) In our souls, as we gather for divine worship, in this case, the supreme divine worship of the Holy Eucharist, Jesus will not, of course, find noisy animals and legally corrupt merchants. Will He find noisy thoughts, perhaps, distractions from God’s word and presence? Will He find legally corrupt interests, nothing that would get us called into earthly courts, but desires and ambitions that are fundamentally selfish? Those distractions need to be driven out of the Temple. Those selfish desires and ambitions need to be driven out of the Temple. As we gather for this divine worship, let us beg the Lord to overturn our distractions, and to apply the whip of His Word to our selfishness. Before we offer the high and holy worship He Himself gave His Church at the Supper before His saving Passion, let us beg the Lord to cleanse all of the individual living stones of the holy Temple gathered here today.

“Zeal for Your House will consume Me” (John 2:17) the disciples said of Jesus quoting one of the Psalms (Psalm 69:9). In His zeal, He wanted to cleanse the Old Temple of noisy animals and legally corrupt merchants, to make it more like the worship of Heaven. In His zeal, He wants to cleanse this assembly today of distractions and selfishness, making our worship more like that of Heaven. Zeal to set things right, and to make God truly the center of human lives, is at the heart of all Christian ministry, particularly priestly ministry. Pope John Paul was fond of speaking of something he called “The New Evangelization.” Where is it? One discouraged colleague of mine once remarked that the New Evangelization is rather like Bigfoot, never closely observed, but occasionally sighted. He was too pessimistic. Wherever, by God’s Grace, there is zeal for God’s House, there is Evangelization, new or old. Wherever there is a desire to set God’s Church right and free her of distractions and selfishness, there is Evangelization, the proclamation of the Gospel. The Church doesn’t need people or priests who start physical fights, but the Church does need people, and especially priests, who cause spiritual disturbances, who take the whip of God’s word to spiritual distractions and commonplace selfishness. All members of the Church are called to be disturbers of the peace in this sense, helping turn the attention of God’s People back to God.