

3rd Sunday in Lent- 3/7/2021

Cleansing of the Temple

Deacon Chris Malone

As we continue our Lenten journey this weekend, the Scripture readings chosen for our hearing focus our attention on how we are to conduct ourselves as we make our journey home to God. In our first reading, we heard about how God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai so that Moses could deliver those lessons for living to the Israelites. The people had come to the foot of Mount Sinai after their escape through the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites were encamped at Sinai as they prepared to continue their journey through the desert to the land that God had promised to them. They were tired and uncertain about the future. The desert lay before them and it seemed so vast. They had already been complaining about the lack of food and water to sustain them. They were restless and they were getting unruly. They had almost forgotten all that God had already done for them. Some had even begun to feel that they were cursed. They feared that God had forgotten them. They did not feel like God's chosen people. During this past year of isolation, fear and sickness, I suspect that many of those same emotions have probably been felt by all of us. I know I have been there.

When the Israelites most needed a sign that God was with them, God told Moses to gather the people at the foot of Mount Sinai to await a sign from God. That sign came when Moses climbed up Mount Sinai as the clouds, thunder and lightning rolled around the mountain. On that mountain, God entrusted the Ten Commandments to Moses and commissioned Moses to share those lessons for living the life of faith to the Israelites and to every generation down to this day. The Commandments are God's gift, not only to the Israelites in the desert but also to us to guide us in properly ordering our lives in fidelity to God and in love for one another. We do well to remember those Commandments every day because they are God's guide for living a happy, healthy and holy life. The first three Commandments instruct us on how we are to relate to God and honor God in all we say and do. First, love the Lord your God and know that there is only one God. Don't get distracted by the ways of the world. Second, keep the name of the Lord holy. Let the name of God be honored in all you say and do. Third, Keep the Lord's day holy. Make time on the Sabbath to rest in the presence of God. In short, keep God at the center of your life

and love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind.

The other seven commandments instruct us on how we are to live together as the chosen children of God, present day heirs to the covenant fulfilled in Christ. The lessons in these seven commandments for living in community are profound and universal. Honor your father and mother. Show respect for and be obedient to your elders. Don't kill. Honor the dignity of all human life. Don't commit adultery. Be faithful in love to those you are given to love. Don't steal. Remember always that the goods entrusted to others are not intended for you. Don't lie. Truth unites us and lies separate us. Don't covet what others have been given by God. Remove envy from your hearts.

In this season of Lent, we do well I think to reflect on and honestly assess how we are living in fidelity to the Commandments. Ask yourself- How am I honoring God's name in the way I live each day? Do my actions confirm my commitment to love the Lord God with all of my heart, soul and mind? Do my daily decisions demonstrate my love for all of God's people ? Do I allow the ways of the world and the urgencies of the day to distract me from fidelity to the wisdom of the Commandments? Do others find in me a sign of God's love and grace and mercy? I invite you during this season of Lent to take the time to examine your life in light of the teaching found in the Commandments and to commit to more faithful adherence to the directions found there.

In today's Gospel, we hear the story of the cleansing of the Temple as recorded in John's Gospel. In John's Gospel, this incident occurs at the beginning of the Gospel immediately after the miracle at Cana where Jesus changed water into wine. After a brief stop in Capernaum, Jesus and his new apostles set off for Jerusalem to celebrate Passover at the Temple. It is easy to imagine that the apostles were a little excited as they made their way to Jerusalem and the Temple. The Temple was the center of everything for faithful Jews. Word about Jesus had already begun to spread and the apostles must have been proud to be part of His band. I suspect they couldn't wait to see what powerful and amazing sign Jesus would perform when they got to the Temple. They had no idea what was about to happen.

Many artists have attempted to capture the scene at the Temple that John recounted for us. The unsettling image of Jesus swinging that whip of cords and chasing the money changers and animals out

of the Temple precincts has been interpreted time and time again over the centuries including at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The righteous anger that Jesus showed is apparent in many of those paintings. The zeal with which Jesus acted to upend the tables of the money changers as his voice thundered against them is unnerving even as we hear it again today. This is not the Jesus we think we know. Jesus literally turned things upside down. Jesus showed his anger in ways no one could have expected. What was that all about?

The Temple was built by the people upon return from exile as a fitting dwelling place for God. The Temple had become the center of religious life and the place where God was believed to dwell. Over time, complicated rules, laws and rituals had been developed to regulate who could come into the Temple, how close they could come to the Holy of Holies and what sacrifices of animals and money they must bring to gain admission to the various precincts of the Temple. Those rules, laws and rituals served to separate God from the people in contravention of the lessons of the Commandments. The marketplace of animals and money changers was created so that pilgrims arriving at the Temple could acquire the proper animals for sacrifice and obtain the right currency for making their contributions to support the Temple. Sadly, the marketplace had become a place where the people competed to barter for the best animals for sacrifice and the best exchange rates for their money. The poor and the strangers were shut out of the Temple while the wealthy sought honor and prestige based upon the animals they brought for sacrifice and the money they contributed.

When Jesus saw all of this, he couldn't bear it. God's house was being desecrated. True worship of the Lord had been perverted by focus on the rules governing access to the Temple. True reverence for God and true humility had been replaced by the cacophony of the marketplace and the pride of those seeking admission to the inner sanctums of the Temple. God's house was no longer a home for all people and had been reduced to a home for the right people. The righteous anger shown by Jesus, the incarnate word, God with us, came in response to the reality that the manner in which the Temple was being managed was an abomination. Jesus, the new Temple of God's presence always with us, acted as He did to insure that the faithful would no longer believe that God's presence could only be found in the Temple. By his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, Jesus remains God with us always and forever. As ones baptized in Christ, we have also become sons and daughters of Christ, temples of Christ and

members of the body of Christ. As living temples of Christ, nourished here by the gift of the Eucharist, we have the duty and responsibility to insure that that the temple God has created in us is a fitting place not only for the presence of God to dwell but also a place where God's presence may be found by all who encounter us. We are charged at the end of every Mass with going forth and bringing the presence of God to the entire world. This time of Lent provides us an opportunity to cleanse our temples, to turn away from selfishness and sin, to amend our lives and to make more room for God in our lives. As you do, turn back to the lessons of the Ten Commandments and try to turn away from the distractions of the world. Try to better love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul and all of your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. Be a holy temple for God's presence, love, grace and mercy to all.