

3rd Sunday of Lent “Cleansing the Temple of the Heart”

Fr. Frank Schuster

What are we to make of the Gospel reading today? Jesus made a whip out of cords, drove out the merchants who sold the doves, sheep and oxen for the temple sacrifice, turned over the tables of the money changers along the way, and said, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” Clearly, the Gospel reading deals in part with the very sensitive issue about the relationship between money and the Church. At first glance, Jesus’ frustration here can be a little befuddling. After all, Jesus also told the rich man to sell everything he had, give to the poor, and to follow him. And in the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus told his disciples how holy the old woman was for giving the little she had to the collection. So why is Jesus now turning over tables and driving away the merchants who sold the sacrificial animals for the temple?

What Jesus is frustrated with in the Gospel reading is how the temple was changed from a “prophetic” place into a “profitable” place. As an editorial aside, I believe some of the worst days of the Church are when bishops and priests value money over ministry. I think of that sometimes when I walk through palatial churches in Europe where there are only a handful of worshipers present on any given Sunday. What’s the point? Having said that, I don’t mind telling you how proud I am about the way our parish developed from our earliest days. From our worship and focus on faith formation, we have also lived out our faith by establishing a Saint Vincent de Paul ministry to help those in need in our community, to care for the needs of kids in Africa through our African Orphan Ministry, by building a church for an orphanage in Kenya while we built our church here in Woodinville, and by hosting Camp Unity Eastside a number of times on our property in our ongoing effort to support those experiencing homelessness. I believe Mother Teresa would smile at what we have done together, while also challenging us to do more.

Having said all of that, the truth is we actually miss the point of the Gospel reading if we dwell on the issue of church and money too long. There is a far more interesting question that is raised in the Gospel reading; namely, how efficacious was the temple sacrifice in the mind of Jesus? In ancient times, an animal sacrifice seemed like a good penance. It is from Leviticus where we get the term scapegoat. After a while, however, Jewish prophets and theologians began to realize that the sacrifice that God desires isn’t the blood of animals, but the sacrifice of a humble and contrite heart (Psalm 51). Jesus didn’t see that kind of spiritual conversion happening at the temple, in the House of God, and so he drove them out with a whip.

It seems to me that the key to understanding the Gospel reading this Sunday comes from Jesus’ challenge, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Remember that a definition of a temple is a place where God is present and worshiped. The irony of course is, when Jesus makes this statement to all those gathered to listen to him, God is fully present in his very person. God is standing right in front of them. Jesus says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” With this statement, Jesus flips thousands of years of sacrificial theology on its head. It is no longer we who sacrifice animals to God for the atonement of our sins. It is rather God now who sacrifices Himself for us and the sake of our salvation. Indeed, in our “temple” here in Woodinville, Jesus gives us his very body and blood in the Eucharist to nourish us, sustain us, and save us. All that Jesus asks from us in return is to offer him a conversion of

heart and to demonstrate this conversion in the manner we love God and love our neighbor. This is far more pleasing to God than burnt offerings. As an aside, this is also why a number of Catholic parishes have moved away from talking about tithing in terms of sacrificial giving. We would rather use the term stewardship instead. This is because Jesus already offered us all the sacrifice we need. What is lacking so often is our response.

And so, we can ask ourselves, do I honor the Sabbath like I should? Am I dedicating enough time to prayer each day? Am I supporting the Church and other charities like I should? Am I generous to those in need? When I receive Jesus in the Eucharist, do I work on becoming more like Jesus to the people around me at home, at work, at school or in the community or am I letting earthly desires take precedence? My friends, Lent is an opportunity for us to grow spiritually, to grow closer to Jesus in every facet of our life. I believe the Gospel this weekend invites us to reflect on all the clutter and inordinate desires polluting our life right now. We are challenged this Sunday to make a whip out of cords so to speak and clean out the temple of our heart!