



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent Year B

Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up

Readings: Exodus 20: 1-17, Ps 18, 1 Corinthians 1: 22-25, John 2: 13-25

All that remains of the Jerusalem Temple is now the forlorn piece of the Western Wall where the devout still meet to pray and wedge paper petitions in the cracks in the mortar. Beyond this relic of ancient Israel stands the rest of Temple Mount dominated by the imperial symbol of the latecomer in the religious development of the Middle East, the Dome of the Rock, the shrine of Islam.

The Western Wall is all that remains of the temple of Herod, the one that Jesus would have known. It had begun as a project in the mind of the very king who tried to find and kill the baby Jesus. By the time of Christ's birth the building work was already twenty years done. By the time of the crucifixion it would be fifty years in the making and by the time of its destruction by the armies of Titus in AD 70, it would have been completed for a mere six years.

Scarcely surprising that the reaction to Jesus' claim in today's Gospel, 'Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up' was one of utter incredulity.

The extraordinary statement comes as a response to the demand for justification for what Jesus has just done.

He had, as we heard, just knotted a rope and whipped the traders and middlemen out of the Temple. Now, please bear in mind, this is not a cue to thrash Sr. Pauline and expel her and the selection of Mass cards and devotional aids from the repository. These Temple traders were a parasitical industry as were the money changers. In order to effect the sacrifices required, for example thanksgiving at childbirth at the Purification or Candlemas, you could only have approved offerings that could be conveniently sold to you at a stiff mark up. You could only offer holy money, not dirty secular money with a graven image on it. The exchange rate for dirty secular money to transform it into acceptable holy money was swingeing.

In short the outer Court of the Gentile where these shenanigans traditionally took place, were a master class in extortion and in getting between the One True God and those who sought to worship Him.

And it is here that we see Jesus at full tilt, angered by the deception of the people and the distortion of the Faith. In this, as the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of the Father, He exhibits the wrath of God. This has a quaint old fashioned ring to it in an age which has majored on a rather fluffy and apologetic Jesus – one, incidentally, wholly at odds with the witness of the Scripture and the teaching of the Church.

Here the judgement is rehearsed on the false idols of the heart. Here the wrath of God is dispensed on all that would come between the Creator and the creature. The Temple is to be, supremely, the place of divine encounter. No thing and no-one must stand in the way. Whatever and whoever tries to do so will encounter the cathartic Christ, purging, cleansing, chastising the sin that separates us from the Truth, the schism that divides us from the Way to the Holy of Holies.

Christ knows that this Temple, magnificent as it is, is a temporary thing. There have been Temples before and they have fallen or been ruined. Nothing built by man stands forever. Jesus knows that, before the first Temple was built, God had no need of a building to encounter the heart of Man, from the call of Noah to the promise under the night sky to Abraham to the revelation at the bush of fire to Moses. The encounter was heart to heart.

So Jesus predicts the New Temple, the sanctuary destroyed and raised in three days, His Body. That alone will endure as the place where we can truly worship. That Body, His Body, is His Holy Church.

We are part of that Body. If we are in Him we are in the Temple that will never fall, approaching the heart of God. That means that whatever uncleanness, whatever corruption, whatever sin stands between us and the Holy of Holies must be purged away, both here and in the time after our dying.

We must let nothing come between us and Jesus. That, at a practical level means regular and prayerful attention to the outer and inner court of our souls.

Christ, in His mercy, has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation to do just that. We, as faithful followers need not stand in the way of His purifying love.

We do not need to fear the whipcord of judgement that will cleanse the Temple of a man's soul so long as we come regularly and trustfully to the place He gives us for cleansing, renewal and encounter.

What a gift of love He gives us in the confessional, a place to come heart to heart with Him and prepare for the divine encounter in the source and summit of our Faith, The Mass.

The spiritual exercise for this week writes itself. We must begin the prayerful preparation for our Lenten confession. We need also to look at our practice and presentation of the Faith. Is there any way in which we make it more difficult for others to believe?

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