

Lent 3 B
St. John 2:13-22
March 4, 2018
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

The House of God
"Stop making my Father's House a marketplace!"

This passage appears in all four of the Gospels. It happened. Jesus was obviously very angry. The house of which he spoke, is also the one in which we sit this morning.

The Temple was built as a place for the presence of God to reside with the people of Israel, God's chosen people. God's presence was seen to reside with the tablets of the law that Moses collected from God on the summit of Mount Sinai, and which were housed in what was known as the "Ark of the Covenant." The Ark of the Covenant was housed in a portable structure of tents known as the tabernacle, which the nomadic Jews brought with them wherever the twelve tribes traveled. When they finally settle down, it took a while-until the reign of King Solomo-and they build a Temple to house the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant. This Temple would be known also as the House of God and as Solomon's Temple. The Ark of the Covenant was carried off as war booty during one of the times Israel was conquered, and its whereabouts are unknown and lost to humanity to this day, if they even exist anymore. The tabernacle we have seen pictures of in movies like "Indian Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark." This was a fairly accurate depiction of the Ark, as described in the scriptures.

Today, churches are known as the "house of God." In Anglican or Episcopal Churches, that presence is believed to be not in tablets of stone, but in the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus, which God left to us as a living memorial of God's presence to us, not only in the person of the Historical Jesus, but also in the living presence of the Risen Jesus. We believe that God is really present in the flesh in the consecrated bread and in the blood in the consecrated wine and water co-mingled before us in the Eucharist known also as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

This presence is the most precious thing in the entire world, and yet, by the world's material standards, it is of little or no value. The only value would come from the silver and gold plated vessels in which the faithful placed the consecrated elements

as a matter of honor and devotion, yet even such as these are of little value to serious thieves. At St. George's, the vessels which are given the honor of holding the body and blood of Christ, the real presence, are of a more humble nature, in chalices made of ceramics and a few of metal, and a glass bowl to hold the consecrated bread. These are of no value to any thief, yet their contents are of infinite value to us.

The churches, then, are places where the real presence of God dwells, and while there are faithful people who populate the churches, God also comes to dwell with them as they celebrate and give thanks for the real presence of God in their lives. Without the presence of God, without being set aside as holy places of prayer, thanksgiving, and this presence, they are buildings not unlike any other. To be the house of God, to be a holy place, a devoted and holy people must also gather there.

Not everyone who enters into God's House has a holy motive or a holy quality which led them there. That is clear when the scriptures tell us that Jesus, when he entered the Temple in Jerusalem and found the money changers and sellers of animals to offer in sacrifice to God, became angry at the motives of these people who were there to make money off the devoted flock of God who came to worship, give thanks, or to beg God's forgiveness for their sins.

God came to earth and became one of us to set our religion straight. We had converted a faith into an institution that made rich rewards for some and which was often led by persons without any religious faith or training, but whose motives were politics and power and preserving institutions and the status quo.

The worst of these were those who obviously profited from religion and took advantage of the faithful who came to pray and show their devotion, gratefulness or repentance to God. Jesus fashioned a whip, overturned their tables in the so called "Court of the Gentiles" in the temple complex, and spilled out the profits of these greedy predators.

Are we free of such rank greed and hypocrisy today? No! for much of my life, televangelists have preyed upon the faithful, in particular, the elderly who live on fixed incomes from social security checks, and these charlatans built empires, feathering their nests with fancy jets, elaborate and expensive luxury cars and massive estates on which they live. And the scam continues to our present day. All this in the name of God. What do you suppose God would do if he walked among us saw this going on in our own time? Even the traditional church establishment leaders-who live in luxury in elaborate homes and palaces representing a homeless, poor God, born in a cave because there was no room in the inn-would have things

to answer for, when the poor, widows, and orphans in the words of Jesus commanded us to care for-go unmet, and the cries of those in need of our help go unheard.

If the hypocrisy of all this is not evident to the faithful, it sure is evident to those who have no faith in God anymore, and who resist the role of religion in their lives. And this has happened in part because a few charlatans and scammers have taken advantage of the faithful and at the same time, their schemes have hurt the cause of faith which they purported to serve in the first place with their fancy TV shows and mega-ministries.

The house of God shall be called a house of prayer according to Jesus: [Mark 11:17] "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it 'a den of robbers."

Prayer is about being in the presence of God. Prayer is about how we are living or not living our faith in God's creation. Prayer is not only words, it is also deeds that go side by side with those words. As James warned us in his Epistle, "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. [Speaking of those who listen to the word of God and then go out and do exactly what they were doing before.] For judgment will be without mercy [James continues] to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

Our deeds are the flesh of our prayers, the embodiment and sacrament of our faith lived out in the world. Our humble parish church may have dinners and fundraisers, but these always benefit the ongoing ministry of the church and not the leaders of our faith community or those in charge of these events. What we have been given freely, we are commanded to give freely to others, not to market it like the goods of this world, but to live it, and there by, our light adds to the light of all the faithful who struggle to be faithful to the commands and spirit of our Lord Jesus. AMEN