

Some years ago I had what I call one of those Lents that just don't turn out the way I expected or planned. It started just fine. I thought that I had created the perfect plan for my Lent that year. I knew the extra prayer that I was going to pray. I knew the fasting and abstinence that I was going to do. I knew the spiritual books that I was going to read. I knew the charity that I was going to set money aside for. I even knew the favorite treats that I was going to give up. Yep, it was all set. I had planned the perfect Lent. But then life happened. Nothing seemed to go right. I would like to think that it wasn't a matter of insufficient discipline but I have to confess there was somewhat of a lack there but really even more than that it was just an overwhelming period of activity, of being busy in life. It was so constant, nonstop business in the parish that it began to chip away at my Lenten practices and so one by one they began to fall. For a while I tried to reassert my will to double-down even more so on my penitential practices, but to no avail. By the time we hit the middle of Lent, my Lent had fallen apart. It had crashed. I was burned

out. I had not been faithful to my Lenten practices.

So one night late in the evening I said to myself, I'm just going to sit here for a while with the Lord, and so that's what I did. And I found it so comforting, so peaceful, and so I decided to do it again the next late evening just sitting there with the Lord and it happened again. I found such calmness and peace. So I made a decision to do that each and every night for the rest of that Lent. Every late night just giving that time to the Lord and in the end by the time Easter arrived, my Lent was saved because I found my life refocused on the Lord. I felt closer and more at one with him than I had for a long time and I realized that that the Lord had brought me to the real purpose of Lent, to grow closer and to become one with him and while the pious practices and activities of Lent are often helpful in facilitating that, that was not what I needed. That year I needed to clear a space to clean out the clutter, so that I could feel the Lord's presence and dwell within it each day.

Our gospel today is the story of the cleansing of the temple. The story when Jesus enters the temple and he sees the money changers exchanging coins and the merchants selling animals to be offered in sacrifice, and it upsets him greatly, so much so that he drives them all out. He drives out the sheep and the oxen and the doves. He overturns the tables laden with coins. The version of the story that we heard today comes from the Gospel of John. We may be more familiar with the version of the story that's found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Those gospels give the clear impression that what upset Jesus the most about the temple was the corruption of the money changers and the merchants. He charges that they have made the House of Prayer into a den of thieves. As you noticed in today's Gospel, there is no such charge. That is because John has something else in mind. The Evangelist John omits that charge because he has a concern about the scene of the temple other than the dishonesty that is taking place there. In John's mind the problem is deeper. In the Gospel of John the problem isn't just what is going on in the

temple, it is the temple itself that is the problem. Jesus believes it's not necessary. That is why he makes the radical statement about a new temple. He says destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. We are told by the gospel that Jesus is speaking about himself. He is the new temple. The very reason and purpose of the temple for the people of God was to serve as the dwelling place for the glory of God for God's presence. Jesus is boldly claiming that he will now be that presence. God is present in him. We see something similar when we compare this story to what is happening in the story that comes right before it, the story of the miracle at Cana. If you recall that story Jesus is attending a wedding in the village of Cana where the wine has run out. In response he takes water from large water jars that are nearby and he changes that water into wine. In addition to the miracle, there's a symbolic intent to the story. The water in the stone jars of the wedding was used for ablutions or washings associated with the rituals of Judaism, a religion which emphasized ritual cleanliness as symbolic for holiness.

But in changing the water into wine Jesus likely was making a point that the role of the laws regarding ritual purity as the means to salvation were being replaced by the salvation that the Lord Jesus alone could give, in him and his redeeming life and word. The biblical scholars call the story of the miracle at Cana, a replacement story. Likewise, the cleansing of the temple is a replacement story. The temple has been replaced as the place for the meeting of God. God is now encountered in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our focus in life is to be with him, to grow ever closer to him, to live with him. He is the new temple.

The one of those Lents that I told you about was also a replacement story. As all of my plans for Lenten activity were replaced by simply focusing on the Lord, there is likely a need for all of us to have our lives cleansed from the distractions and disruptions of life, for them to be driven out of us. Perhaps we all need the Lord to drive out certain things or overturn certain activities so that we can refocus on him, sit with him, dwell with him and live with him.

Let the Lord drive out from our lives that which is doesn't allow us to be united with Him. May he drive out our harsh judgments, our complaining, our excessive worry, and replace them with the kindness, gratitude and peace that come from Him. Let Christ drive out our discouragement and fill us with hope. Let him drive out bitterness, anger and all negativity, and replace them with forgiveness, patience and goodness. Let Christ drive out gossip, lust, too much food and drink and replace them with the self-control and purity that come from living in his presence. Let him drive out excessive spending and materialism and give us, instead, simplicity and generosity to the needy.

Lent isn't about us being able to give things up. Lent is about making room for the Lord. One of my former teachers often was fond of telling us don't forget who Lent really belongs to. It's not our possession. Lent belongs to the Lord. So whatever plans we have for this sacred season just make sure that whatever we do or don't do leads us closer to the presence of the Lord and helps us to become one with him.