

## **“The Temple That Is Christ”**

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent (B)

*“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!’”*  
— *John 2:19*

All right, which is it? The cleansing of the temple, or Jesus throws a tantrum? So he gets angry, mad as hell in fact! He has his reasons! You got a problem with that?!

The question is, why does he get angry? What are those reasons? What inside the precincts of then the central cultic site of Jewish religion so outrages him, to the point of him making a whip of cords and sending money and money changers flying, along with a few poor doves! What is so offensive that would make him risk continued opposition and even arrest?

Part of the answer reads like a bible commentary. First of all, the practice of exchanging Roman currency, or any money for that matter, for the temple coinage (the shekel) was fraught with corruption, tailor made for it. No one got a fair exchange on their denarius; that’s for starters. In addition, temple sellers would regularly lend money to those who needed to buy sacrificial animals (think of those doves)—charging, of course, a high rate of interest in the process (a practice in clear violation of Jewish law). And if this wasn’t bad enough, all these double dealings and shady practices were taking place in a place allegedly devoted to worship, in the very shrine of a people’s ancient faith.

Any one of these infractions alone would have made any would-be prophet and messiah very angry. (Jesus did have his reasons after all.) But when that same messiah happens to be the incarnate son of God—one in whose body the temple of the divine fully dwells—then the outrage is far worse for the offense is far greater.

For Jesus not only attacks those who are making a business out of the sacred; he is pointing to the truth—as yet hidden from his disciples and the world—that the body of Christ, not the temple in Jerusalem, is the new residence, the new cultic home, the new center and source of God’s power and salvation. “Destroy this temple,” John has Jesus declare, “and in three days I will raise it up.” But, as John adds, “he was speaking of the temple of his body.”

Still, Jesus is making a further point, I think, not only about where to worship God, but also how and in what spirit. This question transcends the Gospel story itself. Forget about the whip of cords and the overturned tables. What in our worship, in our relationship with God—whether corporate or private—has become something of a business as well, something of a market place? In what ways, for instance, have we experienced prayer as only a closing in on personal needs and not an opening up to the needs of others? How has it remained solely transactional—as in ‘Give me, Lord, what I ask of you, and I’ll do anything you want?’ (sound familiar?)

More than that, and in mind of Jesus’ own righteous rage, when and how have our spiritual lives, let alone our prayer life, become devoid of indignation? When did we become so cool and passive, so unconcerned, so comfortable, with indignities suffered and wrongs endured across our society and our world? Why do not the zeal over these things ‘eat us up’ as well; why do

they not fill us with an eager and passionate fury?

Thoughts like these may come to mind, I suppose, more readily even as we anticipate our physical regathering next week, the return to our own temple. Today will be, we hope, the last Sunday in which I look out at an empty sanctuary; while speaking beloved words at the Lords table, to be sure, but all the while longing that all of you were here too, you whose lives I remember and cherish, lives with whom I have so yearned to share again the Body and Blood of Christ.

It's been, it seems, a very, very long time, a year that has felt like an eternity. It's true, in that time we have discovered new and creative ways to be church, to be connected with each other. Yet all the while all we've really wanted is to be here, in this place, in this temple, surrounded by friends and by the familiar. Never has the term "getting back to normal" seemed to us so inviting or so vital!

Ah, but there's the problem! There's the danger, if we're not careful—especially if getting back to normal means somehow business as usual. If our prayers return to a rote sameness. If the act of regathering itself becomes the sole purpose, and not a means to see and learn again the way of sacrificial love, the way of the cross, the way that leads our minds and our hearts outside of ourselves, there to dwell in good faith, and in solidarity, with our brothers and sisters around us, and, by grace-filled extension, with brothers and sisters throughout our community and our world.

Indeed, we will be sharing next Sunday something intensely communal, something joyfully physical, something we have not celebrated in quite a long while in this place. The trouble is that even this anticipation, so normal, so natural, can also become a form of business as usual if we let it. In looking only to return we may forget the power that can come in returning, the power that continues to change lives. We may forget that this same Sacrament—so familiar and so longed for—can lead us to a new understanding, a new awareness, to a new ground of intimacy, to new levels of love. For here our temple may become an entirely different place altogether. Here we may meet Christ again—and for the first time!

The Victorian poet Alice Maynell was a High Church Anglican unique in that many of her poems deal with corporate worship, in the very tradition that you and I hold in common as Episcopal Christians. In one of her poems, entitled "The Unknown God," she examines her own transporting, almost mystical feelings following her reception of Holy Communion, even as she becomes aware of another communicant, whom she does not know, sitting next to her. Rather than centered on Christ in the abstract, her thoughts turn to the Christ who is very near, in the next pew in fact—to the God in Christ now incarnated by a fellow communing soul, and one by whom she receives at the end a rare benediction. . . .

"One of the crowd went up,  
And knelt before the Paten and the Cup,  
Received the Lord, returned in peace, and prayed  
Close to my side. Then in my heart I said:

'O Christ, in this man's life—

This stranger who is Thine—in all his strife,  
All his Felicity, his good and ill,  
In the assaulted stronghold of his will,

'I do confess Thee here,  
alive within this life; I know Thee near  
Within this lonely conscience, closed away  
Within this brother's solitary day.

'Christ in his unknown heart,  
His intellect unknown—this love, this art,  
This battle and this peace, this destiny  
That I shall never know, look upon me!

'Christ in his numbered breath,  
Christ in his beating heart and in his death,  
Christ in his mystery! From that secret place  
And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!"

This, clearly, is not the temple as a marketplace; this is not a counting house of prayer. Nor is it worship as rote practice. This is, as Jesus will say later in John, the worship of the Father "in spirit and in truth." It is worship both surprising and soul stretching, worship marked by care and compassion, and by sorrow and joy and wonder in equal measure. It is worship that looks outward, to the dwelling-place that is our world, mediated by a grace only Christ can give, though imparted by the friend, or the stranger, sitting next to us.

May we experience such a grace, such a blessing as well—today, as we pray together, although still apart, and next Sunday, when other 'Christs' will join us here—not to chase us out of the temple, but to help us gather again into the temple—the temple that is the Body of Our Lord, the temple that is the Church gathered in his Name, the temple of open hearts and radical love and perfect peace. Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +