

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE (Jn 2:13-25)

Every year around this time many people develop this strong urge to do a major cleaning, sweep out the dust, get rid of old things and accumulated paraphernalia. This is not the regular weekly or monthly cleanings but a much more thorough undertaking. For husbands it may be a time when they try to make themselves as scarce as possible because the “honey do” list gets really long. I know my list started growing longer a couple of weeks ago, and it seems so long that I may not finish it this year. But then there’s always next spring. Spring time is also the time of Lent and a great opportunity to do a thorough cleansing of our spiritual life, getting rid of the clutter, the bad habits that may have gotten stronger, the distractions to our spiritual well-being, so that love may come in and shine through.

We hear Jesus cleansing the temple of those people and things which have become entrenched in the Jewish tradition of worshipping God but which actually get in the way of true worship. And this event led to the authorities plotting his death because Jesus was threatening their livelihood and way of life.

This was the Passover feast, the greatest celebration in the Jewish tradition, and people came from all over the world to make a pilgrimage to the sacred Temple, the sign of God’s presence among his chosen people. Many would save for a lifetime in order to be able to make this journey maybe just once in their lives. As many as a million people would descend upon Jerusalem at this time. Because they came from so many different places and from so far away, accommodations were made in order for them to be able to participate fully in the tradition. There was a temple tax to be paid for the building and the support and upkeep of the temple. Then there were the sacrifices which had to be offered as a way of asking for forgiveness from God. So the authorities designated people to provide money changing services and to offer animals for sale for the sacrifices. But over time greed took over and what was supposed to be a religious observance became more of a Hollywood production and a banker’s nirvana.

Jesus had been walking to Jerusalem with some of the pilgrims, talking with them, hearing their stories, maybe even healing some of the sick. They became family to him after days of traveling together. But when he enters the city and sees the transformation that has taken place to the temple, his Father’s house where he had spent 3 days as a young boy, he becomes outraged. This isn’t worship of God; this is exploitation of humanity in its most egregious form. And so he attempts to take back the Temple for its original intent, for the worship of God. In so doing, he re-

veals his true nature, and ours, too, when he talks about the temple of his body. The word which he used actually means “sanctuary” where the Holy of Holies was kept, the place where only the High Priest could enter once a year --- at the Passover. We might liken this word “sanctuary” to our modern day “tabernacle” where the Body of Christ is kept for worship and adoration. At the moment of Jesus’ death, the curtain of the sanctuary, which was one seamless piece of heavy, sturdy cloth 40 feet high, was torn from top to bottom symbolizing that there was no longer any separation of God from humans. And when the Holy Spirit was sent by Jesus into the hearts of the people at Pentecost, we became the Body of Christ.

The mantle has been passed on to us to proclaim the message of God’s love by our love for every person. But over time the dust collects in our hearts, cobwebs appear from disuse of some of our gifts and talents, old habits get entrenched from selfish motives and intents. So we need a thorough cleansing from time to time, and today Jesus comes to drive out those things from within that keep us from being the bright rays of sunshine for others. We are preparing for the great events of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and we need to take a hard look at the impediments to our worshipping God. What may have started out as a small thing may have taken over our lives.

Our world’s financial systems are badly broken; maybe we have contributed to their dysfunction in our greed to make more and more money, in order to buy more and more things and go more and more into debt. Rather than sharing what has been so wonderfully given to us with those who are truly poor and needy, we have become focused on our own little selves. We are called to be Good Samaritans. Rather than warm and loving homes, our houses have become another way to enrich our financial portfolio. Somewhere along the way we have lost sight of what a house is for, to provide shelter from the elements of nature, to be a place to raise our families, and a safe haven from the demands of the world. It’s time to cleanse our thinking and make our houses into homes once again, and to put money into its proper perspective. Money is not our Savior; we have but one Savior and that is Jesus Christ.

There seems to be so much violence in the world: in the Middle East, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Darfur and Sudan, in the streets of Mexico which spills over to our country, in our own neighborhoods, and even in our homes. Peace for the world starts with you and me and our willingness to forgive, our striving to live in harmony rather than seeking revenge, our working to reconcile differences and seeking commonality with one another, our accepting others as our brother and sister in Christ, equally loved by God.

It's time to clean house of all of the excuses and rationalizations which we use to not live out the gospel message of Jesus, the justifications we say to ourselves for not doing as Jesus did. I am fully responsible for the choices I make when I gossip or spread rumors about someone. There is no justification for the maliciousness that comes from my mouth. If I go on a spending spree to satisfy my need to feel good about myself, it's not my parents' fault for not loving me well enough.

It is time to cleanse our bodies of all those things which defile the temple of the Holy Spirit. We may have polluted them with evil and foul things -- images from pornography, an excess of alcohol, drugs, food, and of too much stress.

So we pray:

Lord Jesus, cleanse my heart, my soul, my mind of all those things that keep me from loving and being loved. Drive from me any evil or malicious ways which have become rooted in me over the past. Prepare me that I may fully share in that great act of love which we will witness of your death and resurrection. May I be ready to give worship and praise to your Father with you and the Holy Spirit. Lord, hear my prayer.
Amen.

Deacon Mike Richard

March 15, 2009