

The Cleansing of the Temple
03/04/18

As I looked over the Gospel passage we just heard, I kept coming back to the same picture of a good shepherd, a hesitant but obedient son at the Cana wedding, the kind, gentle prophet who astonished the woman at the well, the tender healer, the compassionate forgiver, the wonder worker who brought Lazarus back to life. And now we have this same man making a whip out of cords and driving people out of the Temple. What the heck happened?

After all, the activity He interrupts was not illegal nor was it even unethical. The moneychangers ensured that Jews visiting the Temple could abide by the very laws spoken of in today's first reading. Roman coins bore images of foreign deities and these objects profaned the Temple – they were banned from its precincts.

Likewise, the livestock merchants were important. God's law demanded animal sacrifice, and the poor depended on the uneaten portions of the Temple sacrifices for their own sustenance. The point, however, was that the buzz of these transactions drew attention away from the treasure within, God Himself.

Jesus' disciples recalled the words of Scripture: zeal for your house will consume me. Jesus' actions were simply His way of showing how important His Father's house was to Him. One author asks us to consider where our zeal is focused. Is it on things of this world or on God and His world?

The Temple was the most sacred and hallowed of all places to the Jews; the God of the covenant lived there. Only in this sacred building could a pleasing sacrifice be offered. Therefore, to attack the Temple was to do violence to the very heart of the Jewish people. But Ted Wolgamot tells us this singular place of worship had gradually become a marketplace.

The Temple had given rise to an enormous organization whose members made their living from the temple taxes forced on the poorest, rural people. It had become a place noted for its idolization of wealth and greed. So Jesus' act was symbolic.

He chose the Passover event because pilgrims from all over the world would have been gathering. His radical gesture had the single intent of waking up the Jewish leaders to see the emptiness of their sacrificial gestures - sacrifices made on the backs of those least able to endure them. But, Jesus doesn't just stop at tearing down. He offers a replacement, a new option – His very self, the temple of His body.

Msgr. Ralph Kuehner has some interesting thoughts about this Gospel story, as it relates to us. He suggests that all of us wish we could be holy, if only Jesus would come and do to the temple of our faith what He did to the Temple of Israel's faith: cast out what doesn't belong, because we don't seem to be able to do it for ourselves, at least not with much effectiveness.

We try to pray and find ourselves day-dreaming about what to make for supper, about the latest family argument, about the meeting we're going to attend, about where we're going to spend our money.

We try to simplify but we also like our lives the way they are. We like the cut of style, the thick of the lawn, the escape of vacation, the high from shopping or chocolate or daytime soaps or whatever catches our fancy. We wish we could love better, care better, have more compassion or patience, be more generous, but we don't have the willpower or the energy.

So what are we to do? Msgr. Kuehner reminds us that God will come and drive such stuff from our lives. In fact, the promise is that God will do it whether we wish God to or not, which is probably a good move on God's part simply because most of us are a bit fearful of what God may clear away. In the end, maybe God will redirect our zeal toward something more meaningful, more sacred.