

Third Sunday of Lent, March 19, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

**St. Bartholomew’s Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Curate

Scripture: John 2:13-22

***“No Exception to Holiness!”***

The image of Jesus swinging a whip made up of chords and knocking over tables – is not one that we normally call to mind on a regular basis. It is a powerful image of Jesus who was filled with passion over the desecration of the Name of His Heavenly Father, and the holiest place, The Temple, that was set apart for worshipping Almighty God. It is an image that we need to look closer at, and to try and understand. I believe that in today’s day and age – it is an image that we must take to heart – and fully take exception to what culture is doing to our world. But, rather than being physical – we need to let our voices be heard, and our actions!

**A Closer Look:**

Let’s see why Jesus took exception to the behavior in the Temple – and the “marketplace” that it had become. Interestingly enough – John’s Gospel shows us that this happened very early in Jesus’ ministry, just after the Wedding Feast of Cana – swinging the whip of chords.

**The Passover:**

Passover was the most important of the holy feasts for the people of Israel. In the years since the Exodus and the birth of Jesus, it had become a major spring festival. It was no longer just about removing the yeast or leaven, the symbol of sin, from homes, but in addition, in preparation for Passover, they would repair the roads for the great mass of people who would flood into Jerusalem and whitewash the tombs so nobody would accidentally touch them and make themselves unclean. Homes would be scrubbed clean, cooking utensils washed, and the houses were searched to make sure no leaven or yeast was found. In addition those who lived in Jerusalem were expected to open their homes to guests, and so they thoroughly cleaned their houses. The people in Jerusalem usually dressed up in their finest clothing. It was a time when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It was proper for Jews from all over - to come to the Temple in Jerusalem to give offerings of sheep or oxen. Those who were poor would present an offering of a dove. The animals would be sacrificed in the Temple. The fat would be burned, and the blood would be offered on the altar. The meat would be taken home, and roasted, and eaten by the family. It was also the time when they would pay the temple tax of a silver ½ shekel coin.

“Passover” was a special time of WORSHIP – both in the Temple, and in the Jewish family. Families would observe the Passover Meal ... which 3 years later, Jesus would eat with His Disciples in the upper room just before His arrest and crucifixion. Jerusalem was full of activity and excitement. This was without a doubt the biggest event of the entire year.

As John’s Gospel tells us, Jesus went to the Temple, and saw merchants selling the oxen, sheep & doves.

- Most people who traveled great distances didn’t bring the animals with them to Jerusalem, so they just bought their sacrifice when they got there.
- Jesus also saw the money-changers, whose job it was to exchange the money that the people brought for the special silver ½ shekel for the Temple tax. The people weren’t allowed to use just any coin for the Temple tax. There were people coming from all over the world, and most of the coins had the face of Caesar, or some other pagan god stamped on them. It was thought to be blasphemy to use a coin with an image on it in the Lord’s Holy Temple. So the money-changers would exchange their coins for the special Temple coin.

**Stop – Shop – and Worship?**

The Temple had become, for all intents and purposes, - **a Shopping Mall** ... for the convenience of the people ... a one-stop shopping center ... everything in one place – for a price and of course, a profit. It looked anything but holy! This marketplace or mall was set up in the outer court of the Temple – the Court of the Gentiles. When Jesus came to the Temple, He saw all this merchandise, and the booths set up for the merchants and the

### Third Sunday of Lent, March 19, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

money-changers. This was **anything but holy** in a Holy place. The marketplace had moved inside the Temple area, and the Temple of God was being dishonored. Instead of worship, prayer, and praise, Jesus found a feeding frenzy of corruption and greed. You see, the High Priest, Annas, was probably making a killing by selling franchises for the concession stands to the various merchants and money-changers. The merchants were also making a killing by charging inflated prices for the oxen, sheep & doves. It is also believed that the money-changers cheated the people by charging an unfair exchange rate for their foreign coins. What Jesus saw was greed, corruption, and wickedness being carried out right there in the Temple of God ... in the Court of the Gentiles. **It was anything but holy!**

#### **The Court of the Gentiles:**

The Court of the Gentiles was a place set aside for those who were not born Jewish, but had converted to Judaism. These Gentiles had professed that YHWH was the one and only true God renouncing their pagan ways, and turning to the God of the Jews – the God of Israel. In the Jewish “class system” converts were looked upon as being in a “lower class.” For one of these Gentiles to become a Jew, you had to be circumcised, baptized, and to offer a sacrifice to Almighty God. Then you were given a new Jewish name, and then were made to cut off all ties with your family, even your wife - if she did not also convert to Judaism.

Jesus must have seen these Gentiles as a very special people in the eyes of God. The first century Jews thought that by their birth, they had been chosen and inherited a place in God’s Kingdom. They thought that all that God required was for them to be born a Jew. However, as the Apostle Paul said in Romans 9:6 “*For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.*” These Gentiles, after all, had not been BORN a Jew, but instead they CHOSE to be Jewish because they CHOSE to serve and honor the God of Israel. They had sacrificed a lot just to come into God’s family, and they wanted to be able to worship God in His Holy Temple.

#### **Jesus must have been appalled by what He saw taking place in the Court of the Gentiles – it was anything but holy!**

**Jesus was witnessing all the commotion:** the arguing over the exchange rate, the bargaining over the price of the animals, and He probably heard the hurt and anger in the voices of those who were being cheated.

Can you imagine what it must have been like walking in amongst all of these animals, in what was supposed to be a holy place?

- Jesus smelled the stench of the livestock market.
- Jesus stepped over the manure and side-stepped the paths of the oxen and sheep.
- **This was not a pretty sight – and it was anything but holy!**

Jesus got angry! Jesus had every right to get angry – for this wasn’t the way God’s house was supposed to be treated.

You know, I sometimes wonder what God thinks of His people in the 21st Century.

- Are there some who have gotten off the path that He wanted us to follow?
- Are there some who have turned His house into a social club, just going through the motions of worship?
- Are there some who have lost focus on true worship of our Heavenly Father?

After all – it has been said of today’s society: “**We worship our work ... we work at our play ... and we play at our worship.**”

#### **A Second Time?**

Let’s move forward three Passovers. Shortly before Jesus was crucified, He went into Jerusalem ... and AGAIN He found His Father’s house being desecrated. He cleaned it out AGAIN! Listen to these words from Matthew 21:12-13: “*Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written,’ he said to them, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’*”

### Third Sunday of Lent, March 19, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

In this second time of cleansing the Temple, as is also told in the Gospels of Mark and Luke – Jesus draws attention to the Scriptures that say “**My house will be called a house of prayer.**” These people just weren’t getting it – and as these three Gospels tell us, it made the leaders of the Temple angry – “*the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him.*”

Both times Jesus found a place that was anything but holy! God’s plan is for His House to be a house of prayer ... a special place ... a place of worship and praise, a **Holy Place – set apart from the rest of the world.** But the Jews had taken over the Court of the Gentiles ... and excluded them from worship. All the buying & selling were a total distraction from true worship. No longer could it be said (for the Gentiles, or the Jews) - Psalm 122:1 “*I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’*”

#### **How do you think YOU would feel if you went into church, and:**

- Someone was talking on their cell phone during the whole service.
- Someone was listening to the Bills Pre-Game show on the radio.
- Someone brought their lap-top computer & was working away.
- Someone was watching a movie on a personal DVD Player or iPod.
- Someone was playing a video game.

#### **It would be ANYTHING BUT HOLY!**

In the Temple - Jesus saw their attitude and actions. One’s attitude toward the God’s House should be a reflection of their attitude toward God. What was going on in the Court of the Gentiles was a total distraction – it could just as well have been the modern day example I just gave. God is Holy, and therefore God’s House is to be a Holy Place and we need to be sensitive about being a distraction from the worship of God.

**So let me ask each of us here today** - How many of us can truly say: “*I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord.*”? How many youngster said this week: “**I can’t wait until it is Sunday, and I can go to church.**” OR ... how many adults thought - “**I thought Friday Night Bible Study would never get here!**”

Upon viewing what had just taken place, the disciples remembered the words: “*Zeal for your house will consume me.*” These words are from **Psalm 69:9** “*It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.*” Psalm 69 is a Messianic Psalm that prophesies the coming Messiah. So when Jesus cleansed the Temple, He was showing them that He was truly the Messiah sent from God. Jesus was showing His passion for holiness – a passion - for the things of God. He would not accept any exceptions to holiness - and so He cleansed the Temple.

The Jewish religious leaders wanted to know: “Who do you think you are to be doing this?” They understood that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah when He called the Temple “*My Father’s house*” and so they asked Him “*What sign can you show us for doing this?*” It was right here that Jesus responded: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” While Jesus was referring to the Temple being His own body – the Jewish leaders were utterly confused. It had taken King Herod and religious leaders 46 years, up to this point, to re-build the temple, which still wasn’t finished, and there was no way they were they going to tear it down. And, even if they did, how could Jesus build it back up in just 3 days? They thought that this was ludicrous. Oh, and by the way, this was the charge that they used against Jesus to crucify Him in Mt. 26:60-61. They also used this to taunt and ridicule Him while He hung on the cross in Mt. 27:40.

#### **What was Jesus talking about?**

Jesus was talking about His BODY ... which they would destroy ... BUT ... which God would raise from the dead three days later. They had desecrated God’s Temple, but God would raise up a new meeting place for worship ... centered on Jesus. They came to the Temple to offer their sacrifices. God would sacrifice His Son Jesus, so there would be no more need of a Temple. With Jesus’ death, the Temple veil would be torn in two - and full access to God, the Holy of Holies, would be granted to those who know and believe in Jesus as Lord.

### Third Sunday of Lent, March 19, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

With the resurrection of Jesus, God did indeed raise up a new Temple in just three days.

But you know what - **nobody got it!** Not until after the resurrection. Can't you just imagine the Disciples saying "Oh, so, that is what Jesus meant!"

- It's ironic, that the Disciples didn't remember what Jesus said until AFTER the resurrection.
- HOWEVER, the Jewish religious leaders remembered it BEFORE. Matthew 27:63 records the chief priests and Pharisees as saying "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.'"

#### **What did Jesus mean ... for us?**

Jesus wants a clean temple. AND ... He's not just talking about our church building. Jesus was not just talking about His physical "body" – but the Body of Christ. You and I, as believing Christians, are part of His "body" ... the "body of Christ. Paul in his letter to the Romans, (Romans 12:5) reminds us of our place: "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Jesus is walking among His "temple" every day ... looking at the "body" of believers. What does He see? Does His "body", His "temple," need cleansing **again**? What do you think?

#### **Let's get a little more personal**

**1 Corinthians 6:15, 19-20** "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

In just a few weeks, it will be Holy Week, and we will once again prepare for Easter Sunday. I would like to suggest that before we meet Good Friday once again, that we personally need to be clean "temples" to present to Him. If Jesus cleaned the Temple in Jerusalem, why wouldn't He respond to our request - for Him to cleanse us, to forgive us, and to sanctify each one of us. The definition of "sanctify" is to make Holy. Is there something in your life that is defiling God's "temple"? Is there something that Jesus needs to drive out of your heart ... something that's standing between you and your worship of the One Holy God? Only you can answer that, AND only Jesus can cleanse your heart – by asking Him AND by spending time in His Word.

Listen to these words from the book of Romans 12:1 "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Let us renew our intentions to the Lord as in the words of Psalm 51:10 – "**Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.**"

I would ask that you bow your heads and pray this prayer with me – if you are serious about your commitment to Jesus Christ – and give Him the permission to clean house – to restore you now, and to make you, as in the words from 1Peter: "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.( 1 Peter 2:9)

#### **Let us Pray - TOGETHER: (Repeat after me)**

*Lord Jesus, I know that my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me to avoid sinning again.*

*I believe:*

- *that you died for my sins,*
- *were resurrected from the dead,*
- *are alive,*
- *and that you hear my prayer.*

*I invite you, Jesus, to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me to obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In your precious Name, Jesus, I pray, Amen."*