

Third Sunday of the Great Fast **THE SYNAGOGUE SUNDAY**

Today's Readings:

Col 2: 16 - 23 Let no one pass judgment on you in matters of food and drink or with regard to a festival or new moon or Sabbath

Jam 2: 14 - 26 As the body without spirit is dead so faith without works is dead

Act 10: 1- 8 Your prayers and almsgiving have ascended before God

John 2: 12 - 25 Stop making my Father's house a marketplace

Gospel Acclamation: Because zeal for your house consumes me,
I am scorned by those who scorn you.
I have wept and fasted

On this Sunday we are invited to consider the sanctity of the Body of Christ and do our share to keep it Holy and blameless.

The Temple in the Old Testament

The Temple of Jerusalem was considered to be built on the same spot where centuries earlier Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac. The **first temple** to Yahweh in the history of Israel was built by King Solomon, the son of King David. It was to keep inside the Ark of the Covenant which contained the tablets of the Covenant, some manna from the desert, the staff of Aaron, the bronze serpent from the desert (cf. Heb 9:4). God had repeatedly manifested himself in the Temple since its dedication day. He told Solomon, "*I have heard the prayer of petition which you offered in my presence. I have consecrated this temple which you have built; I confer my name upon it forever, and my eyes and my heart shall be there always.*" (1 King 9:3) From that moment onward the temple was like the heart of the nation. From there prayers, incense and sacrifices were offered every day on behalf of the whole nation. Every Israelite was supposed to visit it at least three times a year to offer sacrifices and fulfill his/her vows. Being the only temple of the nation, it symbolized a privileged place in God's plan and the unity of Israel. Its magnificence was a national pride and, correspondingly, its defilement or destruction was considered an utterly humiliation and disruption of God's election. In fact, when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, besides taking the king with the nobility and all able bodied people to captivity, and after looting the gold and the wealth of the temple, he destroyed it from its very foundations. Likewise, when centuries later the Greek Antiochus Epiphanies extended his dominion over the Israelites, the one thing he did to humiliate and put the population in

total disarray was again to defile the temple, **reconstructed by the returnees from the Babylonian captivity (second temple)**. He even erected a statue of Zeus right on the altar of the temple.

On the other hand, the first thing any reformer in the history of Israel would do was to reestablish the temple of Jerusalem to its original sanctity and glory (e.g. Ezra, Zerubabel, Joshoua, Jehozadak (see Hag 1:12), Judas the Macabee (1 Mac4)). The temple where Jesus worshipped and where took place the action described in today's Gospel was the **third temple, built by the King Herod**. This one also was eventually destroyed in 72 a. C. by the Roman Emperor Vespasianus. Since then there have been no other temples, and therefore no more sacrifices of animals according to the Old Testaments rites.

The temple was the most sacred place for the Israelites. Before even crossing its compound one was expected to go through the ritual of purification and no one would dare to enter its courts with sandals on their feet. Swearing against the Temple, being caught in improperly dressed or behaving improperly inside the temple compound could be punished by death by stoning. Remember, Jesus in the Sanhedrin was accused of cursing against the Temple and Paul was accused of admitting Gentiles into an area reserved for Judeans only. However, even the most sacred things end up becoming common with time. That is exactly what had happened to the Israelites during Jesus times. The change of money from one currency to another, the selling of all kinds of animals for the sacrifices, was a noble service rendered to the numerous pilgrims who during the big feast days would gather from all over the world. Problem was that

1. Merchants were taking advantage of the high demands and prices would soar high on the skies. The pilgrims were therefore exploited;
2. The attention of the pilgrims was distracted from a pure worship of God to a ritualistic celebration: the fatter the animal to be slaughtered, the more generous the money contribution by the pilgrim the more God would be pleased. The externals took over the internal dispositions of the worshipper;
3. The Gentiles or proselytes (the non-Judeans who accepted the Mosaic Law) were denied full right of belonging to the "People of God." The area in the third temple (the one built by Herod during the Roman occupation of Israel) reserved for the proselytes was close to the entrance to the Temple's compound, where all the business activities were taking place, thus denying them a silent and proper place for worship.

Jesus and the New Temple of God

So, Jesus as a young Rabbi could authoritatively stand up for God's rights in the line of the great reformers mentioned above and the prophets who had condemned the abuses of traders and the greed of the temple's officers for fat sacrifices.

However, the situation presented Jesus with an opportunity to pass a new message. He was sent by the Father to build a living Temple in which the fullness of the divinity would reside. The temple of stones was only a symbol of this divine Temple. He, being the only Way to the Father, only through Him humans could offer God a pure and worshipping sacrifice. With him the Old Testament had come to a completion and he was about to introduce a new way of accessing to the Father (the New Testament). In this new order, He would be the Priest and the Victim at the same time in this Temple,. Refusing or ignoring him would be equivalent to refusing the Father and one's own salvation. The letter to the Hebrews was practically written to prove this very point. The instruction given to Moses, "*See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.*" (Heb 8:5) proves that the Tent of the Covenant first and the Temple afterwards were only symbols of the real Living Temple who was to come, namely, Jesus. The same letter says again, "*... When Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.*" (Heb 9: 11-12)

So, through this prophetic action, Jesus is passing a message:

1. The new times have come, the Messiah is here;
2. He claims to be superior to the temple building, "**Destroy this temple and I will build it in three days**" In other words he claims to
3. the Old Testament's sacrifices of rams and calves had run out of their symbolic value, that a new Sacrifice for a New Testament was about to take place. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that after Jesus had chased away the traders and turned their tables upside down, "**The lames and the blind approached him in the temple area (an area forbidden to them, because of their ritual impurity) and he healed them, The children were crying out in the Temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"**" (Mt 21:14); the crowds also were astonished at his teaching Mk 11: 18; and Luke says that Jesus returned every day to the Temple area to teach and the crowds were hanging on his words (Lk. 19: 47). In other words Jesus had mastered the situation and his enemies could do nothing but plot against him secretly.

This is the reason we were asked to read today's passage of the Acts: Peter needed to open his eyes to the new reality and accept the new Temple in its entirety. He so explained the meaning of the vision he had before going to Cornelius' home: "*God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean. ... In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him....*"

If Jesus was in a position to claim respect and devotion in the temple of stones of the Old testament, much more this is true about the new Temple. God's spiritual Temple must therefore be blameless and unblemished. God has a right to the sanctity of his children and his worshippers.

But the house of God, is also the heart of each one of us because the divinity of Christ was pleased to dwell in us as well, and this is true also of each Christian household.

So we are challenged: "*My house is a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves.*"

A den of thieves, a market place . . . where doves, sheep and oxen are sold, money is changed. St. Augustine in his comments of this Gospel asks: "*Who are they who sell oxen? Who are they that sell sheep and doves? They are they who seek their own in the Church, not the things who are Christ's. They are those who say, "We give the Holy Ghost" But why and at what price do they sell? At the price of honor to themselves. They receive as the price, temporal seats of honor, that they may be seen to be sellers of doves. Who sell oxen? They who deceive the people by the very Scripture, that they may receive honors and praises at their hand, and that men may not turn to the truth.*"

Practically, those who traffic God's word and God's gift in exchange of temporal goods like honor, prestige, favors, etc. they are abusing of their position of service in the house of God. This refers first and foremost to the priests, but it goes beyond the priests: it refers to you parents and every household as well:

1. If you refer to God in the house only to cover your limitations or to impose your authority over your children, you are abusing;
2. If you withhold from God your talents only to please yourselves: to have more time for yourselves, to avoid confrontations with the others;
3. If in your house prayers are said only silently and in private. Let us look at the Moslems: prayer is not a private affair; there is always a time and a space for prayer. If nothing else, at least enough space for a small mat to be spread and used as a holy ground. This is a concept that we Christians need to discover: the house is a holy ground. Here in Canada there is the habit of taking off the shoes at the entrance of a home ...

Taking off the shoes in the Bible means not bringing inside the dust (the worries, the stress, the disillusion of the streets, of the workplace). Let us remember that each time we take off the shoes in our homes or at someone's else house.

4. If the only noise heard in the house is that of music, TV and radio or, worse, screaming at one another. How much do we communicate in the house? what level of communication do we have? Who are our best friends? When was the last time we expressed wholehearted appreciation our spouse. Sunday is a privileged time to strengthen communication with God, with the spouse and with the family. In today's prayer the one theme that is repeated over and over and over is: "Observe the Sabbath!"
5. If our only worry in the house is the wellbeing of the house members only. If the poor Jesus is not a daily guest in our prayer, in our sharing of God's generosity, etc. How much do we donate to the poor;
6. If we do not think at a community but only at an individualistic level: our extended family, our neighborhood, our faith community, our national origins, our work community, etc. They also are God's temple and we should radiate our membership by our positive attitudes towards them;
7. If you expect from others what you do not even try to do ourselves;
8. If we do not properly respect ourselves: our good name, our talents and education, our visions, our health, our external appearance. We are God's Temple, it is a great privilege and it should show even on our face.

Mezmur: - As the Lord was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples gathered around him and he said to them, "See that no one deceives you; and be always ready, many will come in my name saying: 'I am the Christ!' The one who persevere until the end will be saved." When the Son of Man will come the powers of heaven and earth will be shaken and the sinners of the earth will cry. Our Lord will then come from heaven down to the earth at the order of his voice and of his angels and with the blast of the horn. At that hour may the Father have mercy on us and spare us from the death of sin: because the Lord is giver of life and the Lord of the Sabbath.

Araray: - The harvest is the end of the world, the harvesters are the angels. Learn the parable from the fig tree: when the hour will come he will send the angels at the sound of the horn.

Ezl: - On the day of judgment and on the day of the Lord: what will I say to the soul since he will not spare from her children and the earth as it enters the grave. When the Father will wear the robe of judgment and the stole of justice, when he will accuse us from the spacious field: then our deeds will lay plain and open and whatever we have done will be read out. As the Lord was on the Mount of Olives, the disciples gathered around him on a Sunday. It would be much better for man to be compassionate and do good.

Selam: - As the Lord was on the Mount of Olives the disciples gathered around him on a Sabbath. He said to them: "Peace be with you and be prepared!"