

Lent Sunday week 3 Year B

The Law of God and the Cleansing of the Temple

Last week we looked at a Gospel which revealed the divinity of Jesus - the Transfiguration - and set it in the context of sacrifice: the “stalled” sacrifice of Isaac in the first reading, and the sacrifice contemplated by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. We discovered there that the Agony itself revealed, not just the humanity, but the *divinity* of Christ who, because he is the Son of God, pours out his life in worship and total obedience to the Father, and will never do anything other than that, despite the weakness of his *human* nature.

This week we will touch on the same area, of the truth of God exploding into human affairs. The Gospel shows us **the Purification of the Temple** in the Gospel of John, and the first reading chosen is **the Ten Commandments** from Exodus. You might say that the weaknesses of human nature are well-explored by the Commandments, which identify our tendency to sin and forbid us to act simply according to our nature. There, clearly, is the encounter - or sometimes confrontation - of what is human with what is divine. Here we are also very near to the mystery of evil. How do we feel about a God who makes us *capable* of such weakness, and then weighs in with full divine authority, *forbidding* what he has made us so ready to do?

The Bible is convinced we are *not* allowed to say that God creates evil or sanctions it: “he has given no-one permission to sin”. That’s valid for the weakest among us, as much as for those who appear to be almost naturally decent and balanced. If doing what is right comes easier to some than to others - we know it to be true - that is a mystery only God himself can penetrate. (Perhaps just as some people are called to heroic deeds, whilst others only have small issues entrusted to them, some of us have to struggle against massive odds just to be half-decent, whilst others have no desire in their heart to struggle against beyond small faults of temper. God knows how he wants to make saints, and his plan for us is the plan of a free Creator. The Bible also says that the pot cannot question the potter, and say *Why have you made me thus?*)

Simply by having a religion we place ourselves into a field of power. For Jews and Christians alike this field is symbolised by these Commandments, and by the demand of formal worship which unites us - saints and sinners alike - as God’s people. *The Temple* is the great symbol of this obedience, and its sustaining is the great duty of the worshipping community.

A Jewish friend once said: “You Christians are to be envied by us Jews: in your religion you still have the Temple” - by which she meant the Body of Christ.

Like the moral life of the worshipper addressed by the Commandments, the Temple represents a point of encounter with God, who is above human scale and experience. Having the Temple means preserving its character as the Holy Place, sacred to God in purpose and in fact; its concept is stretched between the contradictions Solomon expressed in his prayer at its consecration:

Will God truly live among men?

and

The heavens themselves cannot contain You

So here we stand: with a human nature seemingly at war with itself, and a set of commandments we find ourselves unable to keep: and with a Temple in which we are somehow to worship worthily a God who is greater than our whole Universe.

You can see that in the Mass this Sunday we are in the same kind of area as last week: how does God encounter us in our humanity? How does he live with our weakness, how do we live with his holiness?

In personal terms: how am I fit to speak of God, when my life is so fallible and small, and I have so little to show by way of qualification? A weak and foolish human being will always dishonour the God he tries to contain in his own language, or embody in his imagination.

In our effort to answer this very important question we look to our religious instinct, which has got some things to tell us that come from God, and we also look for the guidance of God himself, who has some very surprising things to say to us on the subject.

I think that we can tell from our religious experience that the right response to this question is not to club together and build some mighty structure in which to worship God, something which will dwarf all other concerns and by its sheer scale represent God's majesty. This is the impulse which built the cathedrals, which harnessed our religious impulse to the ambition and wealth of various groups of people.

Much as we may admire these great structures, we know this isn't the necessary way, because we know that you can be as near the heart of the liturgy in a tin hut in a broken colliery village with a drunken priest and a starving congregation, as you can in St Peter's Basilica with a Pope and a hundred and thirty well-fed (but of course absolutely sober) cardinals. We also know that the palpable sanctity of the congregation - and certainly of the priest - is *not* a necessity for the truth of the liturgy; if it were, the church would have died in a very short time. Such things as cathedrals and the impression of other people's holiness can work powerfully for us: but they are not the heart of the matter, and their absence is an improper reason for abandoning the Church.

This brings us to the Gospel. What's happening here? Remember that we are reading John's Gospel - the one which never forgets the *divinity* of Jesus, and is uniquely sensitive to anything which threatens it. Let us also note that in this Gospel the story has changed place.

- In the Synoptics the adult Jesus goes only *once* to Jerusalem: to die. In John, by contrast, he goes to *three* Passovers, the last of which is the hour of God, the hour of the Passion.
- In the Synoptics the Temple is cleansed when Jesus arrives in the Holy City to die, and his action is the last straw which is organically connected to the priests' decision to remove him.
- In John, by contrast, the Temple is purified at the *beginning* of the Gospel, and is the first act of Jesus in the first Passover: everything before that point has taken place in Bethany, where John is baptising, or in Galilee.
- In Mark's Gospel we have an important detail which is eliminated by Mt and Lk.

Mark's Description of the Temple's Purification

In Mark the triumphal entry into Jerusalem the crowd is eloquent and demonstrative, and the event is quite sufficient to alert all the authorities that someone has arrived. When he gets inside the walls, he goes to the Temple: then the Gospel changes gear

(Mk 11: 11-25).

His "surveying of everything" in the Temple represents a measured response to the sacred space. There follows a seven-mile hike and a night's sleep in Bethany, and the incident of the fig tree (three verses) before the Temple is cleansed.

Then comes the sequel to the fig-tree incident, forming a "Markan sandwich" to frame the Temple's cleansing.

Cleansing the Temple in Popular Imagination

There's an undeniable note of violence in the description John gives of Jesus' cleansing the temple. *Zeal for your house devours me* is quite a powerful line: but recall that it is the disciples who remember this line, rather than Jesus. Note also that John has very much imposed the feelings of the early 90's AD on his account. When the story originally unfolded Jesus was among his own people in the capital of his own country and in the Temple of his forefathers. Yet the story presents it as a confrontation between Jesus and *the Jews*. Is Jesus suddenly not a Jew? What has happened is that Jesus has stopped being a Jew and become a Christian. This distortion is made very clear by the vocabulary. Between Jesus and "the Jews" there is enmity: but it is the enmity of the 90's, not of the historical Jesus.

It is frequently said that the cleansing of the Temple is a *violent* expression of the zeal of Christ, in which he displays the *anger* of God against the pollution of the sacred with human greed and materialism. Christians wink at the anti-Semitism: but many people are gratified by the image of a Jesus who shows his humanity *by losing his temper*, and even seek to find in him the solace of a *punishing* God. Many rather self-confident Christians would like to discover that God punishes evil-doers, and this event, they believe, gives them some evidence that it's true. When people accuse believers of simply projecting their own desires and needs onto the heavens, and then worshipping their own fiction, their own desires, this is a good example of a place where they are right. Not only does the real God show no trace of releasing well-directed thunderbolts against the ungodly, but Jesus himself expressly says in various places that this is not true: eg

Do you think those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell were more guilty than any others living in Jerusalem? They were not, I tell you

and

Neither he nor his parents sinned. He was born in that state that the works of God might be revealed in him.

The idea of Jesus representing a *punishing* God is thus not the point, and Mark has made it quite clear, by separating Jesus *surveying all things* from the Cleansing itself, that it is a deliberate, rather than spontaneous - much less compulsive - act. A little knowledge of the Scripture reveals it also as a *Prophetic Act*.

What Are Prophetic Acts?

These are deeds performed by a prophet - often specifically dictated by God - whereby the prophet makes *of himself* a sign to the onlookers of what God is saying to them.

Sometimes these acts seem trivial and arcane, like the prophet burying his underpants (Jer 13): Jeremiah particularly recounts deeds which seem almost private, by which God educates his prophet (see the call of Jeremiah in the first chapter, where he is taught by God through the sight of a tilted cooking-pot and an early-flowering almond tree).

Some are more eloquent.

- Isaiah is so disgusted with the naked opportunism of the royal foreign policy that he refuses to put any clothes on and walks about naked for six months.
- Jeremiah's breaking of the jug at the gate of the potsherders (Jer 19) gives tangible form to the prediction of disaster for Jerusalem: it is as if, surrounded by the complacent people and their leaders, Jeremiah actually strikes the first blow of the oncoming invasion from the North by smashing a large jug. There is no particular limit to the eloquence of that sign: it is truly symbolic, shocking, graphic: when the disaster comes, no ceramic surface or pane of glass will be safe, and suddenly those who look on see that they are surrounded by broken pottery. The prophet's message is instantly understood. He is put in the stocks for eroding public confidence.

The consequences of such prophetic actions range from similar public proceedings - Jeremiah is eventually thrown into a well - to the most personal:

- Hosea is told by God to marry a whore and beget whore-children, and does so. The resulting disastrous marriage is a painful playing-out of the faithless relationship between Israel and God.
- Ezekiel is told to pack a large rucksack, in the sight of all the people, and then to climb through a hole in the city wall and move off into the dark while the people look on. He is miming their own forthcoming flight from the Assyrian invasion. But note that in delivering the sign, Ezekiel himself is the first to leave, the first lonely exile.

It is into this tradition that Jesus steps in his purification of the Temple. But what he does is more than a prophetic sign: it is a fulfilment of the previous prophecy of Malachi:

Look, I shall send my messenger to clear a way before me. And suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his Temple: yes, the angel of the Covenant for whom you long is on his way, says the Lord of Hosts. Who will be able to resist the day of his coming? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like fuller's alkali. He will take his seat as refiner and purifier, he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may make the offering to the Lord with uprightness. The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will then be acceptable to the Lord as in former days, as in the years of old

We should eliminate from our minds the notion of Jesus in the grip of uncontrollable rage, and see how he is above all *making a claim for himself* by doing this deed.

He is raising the stakes immensely: in the tangle of prophetic possibilities current in the first century, there are all sorts of terms and names: *the Messiah*, with his royal connotations, is only one of them. Even the term *Messiah* is patient of many understandings: the Jews had of old lived with a messiah at the heart of their national life: the king, the *Son of David*, was the anointed one. The elimination by Nebuchadnezzar of the royal house meant that the Jews simply raised their eyes to heaven, and expected an even more transcendent figure than an earthly king. The desert community of Qumran expected two Messiahs - one a priest, and one

a warrior. *The Prophet-Like-Moses* - promised in the last chapter of Deuteronomy - is another of these figures of eschatology. *The Prophet Elijah*, harbinger of the end of the world, is a third. The regeneration of prophetic power in Israel had already begun with *John the Baptist*, who actually dressed as Elijah in order to “assume his mantle”; Christians have always applied the first line of our Malachi extract to him. Then the coming of Jesus appears as “*the Lord coming to his Temple*” - what we see in the cleansing is nothing less than the divine hand being laid on the Holy Place and the priesthood (the Sons of Levi). No wonder it is the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, who arrive and ask him what his authority is for his actions; and in the Synoptics, no wonder his reply involves their own refusal to receive the witness of John the Baptist, thus placing themselves outside the community of the saved.

In our Gospel today the response of Jesus is somewhat different, and typically Johannine. Jesus in John has perfect knowledge of the future, and so he cuts to the chase and points to the moment where the chief priests will finally unite against him. There is no disguising the violence of his language.

Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

The implication that their attitude to Jesus risks the very future of the Temple can only be seen by the priests as dangerous talk and *folie de grandeur*. They reply with contempt. But this is absolutely in keeping with the prophetic tradition; the true prophet is always treated with contempt, and always vindicated by subsequent events. So the response of Jesus to the challenge of the priests is consistent across the four Gospels. Of course, by the time John wrote his Gospel the Temple *had* been destroyed, the sons of Levi had been crucified, and the Lord had been raised from the dead.

To this tremendous happening all other realities had become merely relative.

Conclusion

Our liturgy gives us two poles: the demand on us of the holiness of God - expressed in the Ten Commandments - and the arrival of the Incarnate Son of God in the Temple, the place of the Covenant. He is called the Angel of the Covenant in Malachi, and his purifying work is actually not merely ritual - in the Temple - but actual - in the human nature he has assumed. As he arrives in the Temple, so he arrives in the whole human story; the result of his ministry will be that *the offering will be made acceptable to God*; in other words, Jesus is preparing us to be a people capable of worshipping God properly. This has obvious implications for the Ten Commandments, which must themselves be fulfilled by the human family. Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it.

But the perspective for Jesus is his own destiny in Jerusalem. The Letter to the Hebrews depicts Jesus as the true High Priest of our profession, who has entered into the Holy Place bearing his own blood. The arrival of Jesus at the Temple is therefore intimately bound to his condemnation - at which the veil of the Temple will be torn from top to bottom - and his offering of the sacrifice as it should be offered - which will make a new Temple in his body, and a new Covenant in his shed blood. When that sacrifice is made, there will be no more need for pigeon-sellers or the changers of coin.