

Before Covid-19, when we could congregate, talk without a mask and hug our friends without fear, we used to have various sales in the Gathering Hall, sometimes several at the same time, especially around Advent and Christmas, with fundraising for the Youth Mission Trip, bake sales, and even book sales. The Gathering Hall was crowded, and a couple of persons told me at several occasions that they did not like that, because it was like the Merchants in the Temple, and Jesus was against this kind of thing. I did not argue, but I did not stop our sales either because, for me, it was not the same problem. Jesus would not become angry if he were visiting us during a bake sale for our youth, as long as the sale does not interfere with the worship, and as long as the prices are reasonable.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus enters the Temple of Jerusalem at the beginning of his public ministry, sometime after the sign given at Cana when he changed the water to wine. We know that Jerusalem was very busy around the time of Passover, with pilgrims coming from all around the Jewish world to celebrate the feast at the Temple. People had to offer animals for the prescribed sacrifices, and they needed to change their money to the money of the Temple. So, some people were making huge profits during the feasts. In the Court of the Gentiles, which was the largest court of the Temple, people were taking advantage of others, they were stealing, they were cheating, they were abusing the poor. We know that because it was documented by several Jewish historians as Flavius Josephus. We know that Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamaliel, the last leader of the Sanhedrin before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., protested against the inflated price of the sacrificial doves sold to the poor who could not afford to buy a lamb. As a result of Simeon's complaint, the prices dropped by 99%, and the merchants still made profit! (*cf. The Politics of Jesus – Obrey Hendricks*) So, we can understand why Jesus became so angry.

Another reason is that the whole Temple was a sacred space. At one time the animals for sacrifices were sold outside the city, but the High Priest Caiphas authorized the selling in the Court of the Gentiles. Now, knowing that there was a need for an estimated 255,600 lambs at Passover, plus the oxen for other sacrifices, and the doves for the poor, it is easy to imagine how crowded and noisy the Temple was. The focus should have been on worship, but even the worship was disrupted with all that was going on in the Court of the Gentiles. And Jesus' anger becomes even more understandable. The Temple was supposed to be a house of worship for all, not a bank and a shopping mall.

How do you feel when you imagine Jesus making a whip with cords and chasing with it merchants, cattle, and putting down the table of the money changers? It's hard to imagine Jesus being violent! And if you feel uncomfortable with this episode of Jesus' life, know that you are not alone, and that bishops and scholars have been arguing about it since at least the second Century. It's interesting to know that you have 2 schools of thoughts: for one it was a non-violent event because Jesus only chased the cattle with his whip, and talked to the merchants, for the other it was a violent event justified by Jesus' holy anger toward those who did not respect the holiness of the Temple and took advantage of the poor. What is very unfortunate, is that Augustine, one of those who believed that it was a violent event, used this episode to justify Christian violence, and many who followed used the same line of thoughts: Jesus used violence against the merchants of the Temple, so it is legitimate to use violence against those who... fill the blank. Even St Bernard of Clairvaux justified the crusade claiming "that fighting the *pagans* with the same zeal that Jesus displayed against the merchants was a way of salvation." Even John Calvin, who was accused of having helped to burn the theologian Michael Servetus alive, defended himself by using the purification of the temple.

Unfortunately we can come to justify almost anything with the Bible when we don't use it in its context. What is important in this passage is, first, the declaration of Jesus to the merchants: "*Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!*" My Father's house! Jesus reveals who he is: the Son of God. He reveals his messianity, his divinity, his special relationship with God, his Father. John tells us that the disciples, after the resurrection will remember this event and will realize that it was a prophetic

act fulfilling a verse of Psalm: 69:9 *“Zeal for your house will consume me.”* This passage is a revelation of Jesus as the expected Messiah and an explicit announcement of his passion. His Zeal for God his Father will consume him, he will die on a cross. And this is made clear with the dialogue between Jesus and the leaders of the Temple, who did not understand that Jesus was talking of himself as the living Temple of God, as they were talking of the physical Temple built in stone. Both eventually will be destroyed, only Christ will raise from the dead and is still present with us today.

For the people of Israel the Temple was the place where God was physically present among them. The Holy of Holy was revered and only the High Priest could enter it once a year. Yet, despite this most holy presence in their Temple, people and priests lived their lives as if God was not there. As if God could not see. Few steps from the sanctuary of the living God people were taking advantage of the less fortunate and of the poor, thus doing exactly what was the opposite of what the People of God was supposed to do.

This took place about 2000 years ago. Are things different today? I'm not so sure. We worship the Lord on Sunday morning, we gather as the people of God, we receive the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, but too often we fail short to live according to what we are: the Body of Christ in this world, the Temple of the Spirit. We are frail human beings aware of God's presence in our lives, and yet we have so many difficulties to love and serve the Lord with all our heart, strength and mind. We are part of the Body of Christ, called to pursue Christ Mission in this world, and yet it is so difficult to love and serve our neighbor as Christ is asking us to love and serve: with all our heart, strength and might.

We believe that Christ is sacramentally present in the tabernacle and yet, too often we forget this loving presence in our midst, doing business as usual. Sometimes we realize this awesome presence in the church, and we can't do anything but fall on our knees and be silent.

The great difference between the people from Jesus' time and us is that since Jesus' death and resurrection we don't need to go to the Temple to find God, to find Christ. We don't need to go to a church either. Maybe more than before, because of the pandemic, we came to realize that we can worship the Lord, we can experience his divine and loving presence, anywhere at any time. If only we are able to stop for a while, either a second or an hour, and are willing to open our hearts to the Lord we will feel God's presence, God's love, and we will receive what we need to love as we are commanded to love, both God and our neighbor. We heard the 10 commandments given by God to the people of Israel, Jesus told us that when we love God with all our heart strength and might, and we love our neighbor as ourselves, we are fulfilling not only the 10 commandments, but all the Law and the prophets.

As we progress in our Lenten journey toward the joy of Easter, the readings today invite us to look at our lives, and to identify the thoughts, actions, omissions, realities, that are obstacles in our lives to our relationship with God and with our neighbor. This is the time to ask the Lord to help us to worship him fully, and to love those around us as he loves us. This is the time to ask for forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness. This is the time to ask the Lord to give us the strength and courage to change what needs to be changed in our lives, in our hearts, in our minds, in order to be beacons of love for those around us.

I love this prayer from Richard of Chichester: *Day by Day Dear Lord, three things I pray, To see you more clearly, Love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, Day by Day.* I hope that all of us will be able to make this prayer ours. Amen.