

Homily: Third Sunday of Lent 2021

One of my earliest memories of watching the news on TV was the fall of the Berlin wall. I remember seeing the pictures of people with pickaxes taking chunks out of it, and seeing others sit on the top of it. At the time, I had little, if any, real understanding of what was happening. It was one of those moments of history which was significant not just for what we saw, but for what it symbolised. A wall was being demolished: this is something that happens all around the world every day; but this was different. It meant an end to a painful divide, a chance for a new and better future, an opportunity for a fresh start.

Something similar can be said of the Gospel event we hear of today. On the face of it, the Lord is simply turning over tables and driving money lenders and traders out of the temple precincts. But this is a moment which symbolises an historic change, a new beginning, a fresh start in the relationship between God and humanity. These traders were selling animals for sacrifice; the money changers were taking pagan coins in exchange for coins which could be taken into the Temple: all these people whom the Lord drove out were working to ensure the smooth running of the Temple and its sacrifices. In a way, the Lord is proclaiming an end to old ways. The sacrifices of animals are not needed by God. He, the Lamb of God, will be sacrificed for our salvation, and that will be the start of a new relationship between God and humanity.

There are signs of this sacrifice in the Gospel today. When Jesus drives the traders out of the Temple, His disciples remember some words from one of the Psalms: “Zeal for Your house will devour me.” And yet, this isn’t quite what the psalm says – it actually says, “Zeal for Your house *has* devoured me.” By changing these words, by putting them in the future, they begin to point to a future event: Jesus will be devoured, consumed, by love of God and His people. He will be completely offered to God, His whole life given in loving service and in His sacrificial death.

An even more obvious pointer to the cross is found when the authorities ask Jesus for a sign to justify His actions. “Destroy this sanctuary,” He says, “and in three days I will raise it up.” As the Gospel makes clear, He is not speaking of the Temple building, but the sanctuary, the dwelling place of God, which is His Body. And they will destroy it. They will have Him put to death. But He will raise up this Body on the third day, the day of His resurrection from the dead. They ask Him for a sign to justify His actions: the sign is His resurrection. This is the new beginning, the new creation, the new relationship between God and humanity which means we no longer need the Temple.

Christ is the real Temple: He is the dwelling place of God in our world. And we, His disciples, are also called temples of Holy Spirit. God dwells within us, too, by the grace of our baptism. Hearing today’s Gospel, we should invite Jesus to cast out of this temple everything which is against His will. We should pray that we may be a worthy dwelling for Him. We have the sacrament of reconciliation precisely for this reason. Jesus wants to cast out of us everything that prevents us from welcoming His divine presence. This growth is not just a question of more effort on our part; it is a work of grace. We need Jesus to do this

within us. It's striking that, at the end of today's Gospel we're told that Jesus "never needed evidence about any man; He could tell what a man had in him." He knows what is within us; He knows our hearts. He knows what needs to be removed from them, and He can drive these things out, if only we invite Him in.

Hearing the Ten Commandments in the first reading today, we can appreciate what Jesus might want to drive out of us. The desire to harm, to possess, to be our own god; the reality of pride, jealousy, hatred or unruly desire within us. It's significant that, just before giving the commandments, God reminds the people that He has brought them out of the land of Egypt, the "house of slavery". Our sins enslave us: we find ourselves repeating the same mistakes, falling prey to the same faults. We need grace, we need Jesus, to drive them out. And when He drives them out, He brings us out of the house of slavery, and leads us to the house of the Father; He even makes of us the place where God can dwell.

Twice today in the Gospel we're told that the disciples "remembered". They remembered the words of Scripture, and later, at the resurrection, they remembered what Jesus had said and done. When Jesus drove the traders out of the Temple, the disciples had little understanding of what was happening; but later, in the light of the resurrection, they saw clearly. Many times in life, it will be like this for us: moments when we do not understand why something is happening, where God is, what He's doing. Perhaps these are the very moments when Jesus is working within us to drive out all that harms us. And later, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, in the bright light of heaven, we will remember and understand all these things, seeing how the Lord has been constantly at work within us. And we shall see the sign the authorities demanded – we shall experience the resurrection, the sign which justifies everything that Jesus has done, and continues to do, in our lives.

Fr Andrew

