

Temple razed for temple raised

3rd Sunday of Lent – Cycle B – March 7, 2021

Readings: Ex 20:1-17; 1 Cor 1:22-25; Jn 2:13-25

“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’” (Jn 2:19)

Prologue: In the Biblical tradition, Temple provides a wide array of significances: God’s dwelling place (1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:14; Ezek 43:5), place of divine communication (1 Kings 8:28-29; Isa 56:7; Ps 138:2), centre of the cosmos (Ezek 5:5; 38:12), symbol of holiness (1 Kings 8:6-7; Ezek 44:5; Acts 21:28), bearer of community identity (Isa 51:16; Ezek 40:1–43:12; Ps 79:1), linked to justice and peace (Isa 1:10-17; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21), synonymous with Jesus’ bodily presence (Jn 2:19-21; 4:21-24) and the body of Jesus’ disciples (1 Pet 2:4-5; 1 Cor 3:16). Indeed, Jesus shifts the OT focus on the exterior Temple-building to the inner temple of God’s indwelling Spirit in the life of the individual and community-church which requires rebuilding.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is one of the two versions of the Decalogue—Ten Commandments—the other being Deut 5:6-21. The first three commandments (vv.2-11) deal with one’s relationship with God, while the other seven (vv.12-17) pertain to right relationships with others, beginning with one’s parents. The Christian tradition holds the Decalogue and Jesus’ Beatitudes as the sum and substance of the moral, ethical life. While do’s and don’ts are necessary for smooth functioning of any society, absolutizing them often leads to excessive legalism and slavish adherence to the letter of the law while forgetting the spirit of the law. By putting God and worship of God as the first commands, Mosaic Law rightly stresses the centrality of God, without whose presence and power all else comes to naught. While one would think that ten commandments were enough to set the foundations for ethical-moral living, the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the law thought otherwise. These religious hierarchs multiplied the commandments endlessly, thereby making of religion a backbreaking struggle to fulfill the demands of the law and the complexities of the cult full of elaborate, expensive sacrificial offerings to either please or appease God. According to this thinking, one could ‘win salvation’ by one’s deeds, and there was, actually, no need of depending on God’s mercy or graces. The Law almost became a substitute for God: a God-less law-fulness. Jesus criticizes this market-mentality in one’s relationship with God.
2. The account of Jesus’ provocative and prophetic ‘cleansing of the Temple’ appears in all the gospels. However, today’s reading from the gospel according to John differs from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew-Mark-Luke) on three significant points: (a) John puts this episode right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and not just before his passion, (b) Jesus “makes a whip of cords” (v.15) thus showing greater anger and force [a feature taken up by some ‘theologies of revolution’], and, (c) Jesus cites Ps 69:9 – “Zeal for your house will consume me” (v.17). What does John’s redaction imply? First, by putting this episode right at the start of Jesus’ ministry, evangelist John shows Jesus laying down his cards on the table at the very outset, unlike the synoptic writers who interpret this ‘cleansing’ as the climax of Jesus’ mission leading to his passion and death. Second, when Jesus is asked for a ‘sign’ (v.18) to validate his blasphemous action and accusation against their most holy Temple, he replies, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (v.19). Since nobody understands what Jesus is saying, the evangelist explains that: “he was speaking of the temple of his body” (v.21). Third,

John wrote his gospel twenty or thirty years after the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed around 70 AD. So, John was telling those thinking of following Jesus that they need not feel any nostalgia about the razing of the old temple since God's flesh-and-blood Temple, Jesus, who was 'destroyed' by religious hierarchs was now 'raised' by God-*Abba* as a new temple. In this new temple—not built with mortar and bricks, but with hearts, minds, hand and feet—a new covenant and a new relationship was being initiated by God.

3. While the first part of John's gospel (1:19 to 12.50) is known as the 'Book of Signs' comprising seven signs, which are all miracles, we could see this 'cleansing' as Jesus' prophetic, symbolic action to denounce and announce, break and build, raze and raise. At the start of his ministry, first, the Johannine Jesus makes a denouncement: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (v.16) and an announcement: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24); hence, God cannot be confined to one church or sanctuary. Second, when "he drove all of them [mercenaries] out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.... poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables" (v.15), Jesus was quite literally 'turning the tables' to their devious ideas of trade-worship, which implied: worshippers give God something; God gives worshippers something. By contrast, Jesus was leading his people to a deeper plane of worship where one could be totally at home in "my Father's house" for God's love is gratuitous, generous and fore-given. No conditions, no commerce, no cattle, no coins. Third, by referring to their plans to destroy his body, Jesus was fore-telling his detractors that they would, eventually, break his body but they would never be able to silence him and shut up God's Spirit, for their razing of this body-temple would result in the Father's raising him to life eternal. This is both the sign they seek and the sign they cannot read for they are obsessed with externals and ostentation while he is calling all believers to interiority, surrender and faith in God.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Temple:

Today's second reading says: "The Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified!" During his lifetime, people yearned for 'signs' (miracles) from Jesus for him to 'prove' his claims. Jesus never worked signs as proof of his divine sonship but as fruit of the believer's faith. So, Paul's message of Christ's dying-and-rising might seem disappointing to those "Jews" who look for *signs* (as in the gospel reading) or to the "Greeks" who treasured timeless truths (*gnosis*) to be stored up in their heads, releasing their spirit from the prison of their bodies. To both these groups, Paul points to Christ's cross, which reveals God's infinite power, for it inevitably result in the resurrection. Interestingly, Christ's cross is sandwiched, so to say, between the reading of the Decalogue and Jesus' 'cleansing of the temple'. Therefore, the cross is the crux and the climax of both, Law and Temple.

In Lighter Vein: Trying to test the knowledge of a class of catechism-kids, a bishop once asked them, "By what sign will people know you are Christian?" Nobody answered. Seeking to give them a clue, the bishop thought of pointing out to his pectoral cross, whereupon a little girl blurted out, "Love!" The bishop wanted to say, "Wrong!" but realized the wisdom of the child. Does true love animate the 'sign of the cross' that I wear, begin my prayers with, and trace on others' foreheads? Without self-sacrificing love, all our works and our worship remain at the level of externals, commerce, lip-service and trade-worship. Let's strive to enter more deeply into our own inner sanctuary and seek communion with God's Temple: Jesus.
