

English Mass at the Chapelle de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Lyon  
6 March 2021  
Vigil Mass of the Third Sunday of Lent, Year B

### Homily notes on the Gospel: John 2:13-25

The 'Cleansing of the Temple': while in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, Jesus drives out of the Temple all the money-changers and sellers of animals and pigeons. *'Take all this out of here and stop turning my Father's house into a market.'*

Here we see the righteous anger of Christ. The scene is certainly violent, though the text does not say that Christ actually hurt anyone (whether man or beast or pigeon)! It would have been enough to scare them away.

When we are angry, often it is because of our selfishness, frustrated greed or wounded pride. But we can also have (and should have!) a righteous anger against an unjustified hurt. In fact, shouldn't we be more angry – more motivated to act – against all the injustices we see in our society?

But why was Jesus angry when these merchants and money-changers were performing an important service to the Temple, to enable religious Jews to offer sacrifice to God in his holy place, exactly in accordance with the Law that God had given through Moses?

We need a deeper understanding of the powerful symbolism of Christ's action. His cleansing of the Temple signified that its days were coming to an end. It was not just the abuses that had to stop; the whole system was going to be replaced. There was a new Temple through which believers would have access to God, in which they would offer God right worship in spirit and truth: that is, the Temple which is Christ's own Body. *'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'* [...] *But he was speaking of the sanctuary that was his body, and when Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the words he had said.*

In passing we may note that this last comment gives us a clue how to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The disciples *believed the scripture and the words he had said*. That is, they both believed in the Psalm text (*Zeal for your house will consume me*) and they believed Christ's prophecy of his bodily resurrection. In the light of the risen Christ, they could for the first time truly understand what the Psalm had meant, and see that his own prophecy was true. Christ had fulfilled the Scriptures and given them their fullest sense; and the Scriptures gave the disciples reasons to believe in him as the One whom they had foretold. The New covenant had been foreshadowed in the Old and was now being brought it to its perfection.

What is this new covenant? Jesus was consumed by an ardent desire to establish God's dwelling on earth, firstly by purifying the sanctuary in Jerusalem, then by accomplishing the definitive reconciliation of God and humanity through his own sacrifice, once and for all, on the Cross. By our baptism in Christ, joining him in his death and resurrection, we too become temples of the Holy Spirit, our bodies sanctuaries of God himself (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).

Finally, I would like to share a curious detail that struck me recently in this gospel passage. We heard that Christ scattered the money-changers' coins, but a more literal translation would

be: *he 'poured out' the money-changers' coins.* We find this word, 'poured out', in the other Gospels and again in the Mass when Christ offers the chalice to his disciples: 'this is the chalice of my Blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, which will be *poured out* for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins' (cf Mt 26:28).

I wonder if in the cleansing of the Temple, the pouring out of the money is a kind of obverse, like a negative photograph, of the pouring out of Christ's blood. In a sense, the coins had become the lifeblood of the Temple institutions, and their circulation kept the whole system going; they had distorted the true worship of God by what was mundane and even tainted by human greed. This is what provoked Christ's righteous zeal.

So the Temple had to see its lifeblood drain away, symbolically at least, signifying the end of the Temple cult, before the true Temple, Christ's body, would have its own lifeblood poured out, which would be only the beginning of true worship. Jesus is 'the mediator of a new covenant' whose outpoured blood 'speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel' (Heb 12:24).

The blood pouring out of Christ's open heart on the Cross gave birth to the Church and her sacraments. His blood will never cease to give life to those who partake of the Eucharist. 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day' (Jn 6:54).

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