

Third Sunday In Lent, March 8, 2015, Year B

Saint Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Rector

Scripture: John 2:13-22, and Various

“Clearing The Temple ”

I was reading a commentary by famed Anglican Bishop and Theologian, N. T. Wright and found myself engrossed in the story that he used as an illustration for the Holy Gospel of the Jesus' clearing of the Temple. I had the opportunity to meet him at Westminster Abbey in 2003, as he celebrated the Holy Eucharist, and then several times when he visited Trinity School for Ministry, where I attended seminary. I enjoy and respect his work and have many of the dozens of books that he has written. He began this commentary by writing that *“once upon a time there was a king who wanted to give his country a new lease on life.”* There was a city at the top of a mountain that the king wanted to capture and he would make it his capital. But there was a major problem with this plan – this city was high on top of a rocky mountain and the people living in this city would have an easy time defending against any attack to capture it. The leaders of the city knew that warding an attack would be easy and so they send a message to this king that all of their regular guards had gone off duty and they put the blind ones on guard and the lame ones to take messages. This didn't fool this wise king and he knew that the one thing that this city needed was water. He discovered where the spring of water was and knew that this would be the way into the city. He challenged his men to climb up the shaft where the water was drawn and fight their way in – and promised that he would make the first one to successfully get in his new general. They went up and took the city and it became his new capital. He remembered how the original inhabitants scorned him and his troops and what they said about the lame and the blind – and so he made a rule – no lame or blind allowed here, please – mocking his enemy. The king was David, and the city was Jerusalem and the house where the lame and blind would not be welcome would be the Temple. This story is told in 2 Samuel 5:6-10 and 1 Chronicles 11:4-6. Today we look at how King Jesus comes to Jerusalem and the Temple – a thousand years later.

I want to suggest to you that Jesus did to the Temple's traditions what He did to the money changers tables – He turned them upside down! Matthew's Gospel gives an account of a second time that Jesus cleared the Temple, closer to His death, which says that after Jesus had His say about the money changers and his Father's house *“the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.”* (Matthew 21:14) At the heart of Jesus' ministry and purpose was to bring healing and forgiveness of sins! Jesus reflected the character of God the Father – showing compassion, mercy and love!

Remember God had initiated the sacrificial system – it was what the Temple was there for – linking Israel with God, hour by hour and day by day, and that perfect sacrifices without blemish were to be made. If people could not change their money to the Temple coinage or buy doves, even for a short while they could not offer sacrifice. They would purchase animals that were guaranteed to be perfect for sacrifice. The sacrificial system depended on money changing and animal purchase. One could not bring their own animals because during a long journey anything could happen to the animal and then what? The money changers were also important because you could only pay the Temple tax, which was paid annually by every Jewish male 20 years of age or older, with the coins of the Temple. With such a large group of travelers and

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because of the seasonal nature of the celebration – the marketplace in the outer courts of the Temple I am sure became a place of exploitation.

The Temple was the beating heart of the center of the Jewish world – it was the center of worship and music, of politics and society, the place where the Jewish people celebrated and mourned the lives of their families and community. Most of all – it was the place where Israel's God – Yahweh had promised to live in the midst of His people. I truly believe that while Jesus was upset with the high degree of commerce and the form it had taken – He was more upset with the corruption at the heart of the Temple itself – the leadership! "*Jesus made a whip of cords and drove all from the Temple area.*" (John 2:15) The holiness of God was at stake and so Jesus took fast and furious action. The Disciples remembered the words from Psalm 69:9 "*zeal for your house will consume me.*" Jesus' powerful actions are declaring that the leadership of the Temple itself is now under God's judgment! The head on conflict with the Temple leaders and especially the High Priest are about to come to a head, and the leadership is going to want to kill Jesus – and they were watching Him and waiting, mounting up ammunition to arrest Jesus and put Him to death.

Remember, John sets the stage by telling us that the Passover was near. Jerusalem and especially the Temple were filled with people from all over Israel and the Roman Empire. That day in the Temple courts – Jesus challenged the leadership to restore God's House to a place of Prayer – and they asked Jesus "*What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?'" "Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." "The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" "But the temple he had spoken of was his body."* The first Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and then rebuilt through the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah and others, but certainly not to the glorious magnificent splendor of the first Temple, built by Solomon. Years later King Herod wanted to try and restore the Temple to glorious splendor and so he started work, replacing foundation stones and bringing in over 10,000 workmen to rebuild and enlarge the Temple. The work outlasted the life of Herod and one of his sons was left to finishing the job – taking 46 years to complete. That is why they were so surprised at Jesus' promise to "*raise it again in three days.*" To most Jews and the upper classes that controlled Jerusalem's Temple these words that Jesus said would sound blasphemous. They did not realize that what Jesus was doing was answering the threats that they had been making against His life – and that He would rise again after three days. Ironically, three years later Jesus would be accused at His trial of saying that He would destroy the Temple and raise it again, and then He would be mocked with this repeated charge as He hung on the cross. There was no pleasing the Pharisees and Sadducees – or the Priests of the Temple, and they would have Him followed in hopes of catching Jesus doing something they did not approve of.

Imagine it is the busiest time of year, whether at home or in your place of business, and you have made all of the preparations – and someone comes in and tears down everything you worked on – telling you it was all wrong. You are not just angry but you feel threatened. That is the point of view of these leaders of the Temple – but it's just that their purpose and even their

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leaders are misguided – like the king – appointed by the Romans and allowed to keep up the practice and traditions – to keep the people somewhat placated. Jesus knew that their clock was ticking and so His words were letting these people know that the Temple – the center of their lives and business would soon be destroyed. Jesus knew that in 70 AD the Romans would not leave even a stone standing of this center of their civilization – also alluding to His murder at their hands. Jesus wanted to set straight their focus – that their lives should be about prayer and relationship with God – our heavenly Father – and not about the ritual. While rituals and liturgy are important – they are not the ONLY thing – they can become an idol in some people’s lives, improperly taking a place above their original purpose – which is to deepen their relationship with and worshipping God Himself.

This morning we prayed the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments, and we just heard in our Old Testament lesson from Exodus 20 – that God reminded His people where He should be in their lives – in our lives. The first 2 commandments make this clear -"*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*" "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*" "*You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*" (Exodus 20:1-2) When the world lets “stuff” – whether rite or ritual take a place higher than where God should be in the lives of His people – God lets the people know. Jesus reminds the world "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" "*This is the first and greatest commandment.*" "*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (Matthew 22:37-39 NIV) Jesus’ words echo what God Himself told Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 - a prayer called the “Shema” "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*" "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" This prayer is found on the doorpost of every Jewish home – rolled inside a mezuzah. They would kiss their hand and touch the mezuzah in leaving or coming through their doorway. This prayer has been prayed by Jewish people for thousands of years – and in it God is saying two things – He is one God (we know this in the Trinity) and **He is telling the world where He must be in our lives - #1!** God has to be first – He is number ONE! And then - Jesus added for us to love one another as well. The first four commandments that He gave to Moses deal with the relationship of mankind with God – a vertical relationship – while the next six are specifically how we are to deal with one another – a horizontal relationship – "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus cleared the Temple that day, I believe, to remind the world to get right with God – in prayer, in communication, and in worship. In doing so – He also reminds us to get right with our relationships with one another – God first, then each other, then ourselves. The Apostle Paul reminds Jesus’ followers to clear our own temple: "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;*" "*you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NIV) In cleansing your temple – Love God, love your neighbor – but remember to love and forgive yourself. This Lent please make it a priority to be clearing your temple!