March 3, 2024 **BEAUTIFUL LAW**

The gospel passage for the third Sunday in Lent is St. John 2:13-22, in which we read that Jesus went on a cleaning spree in the Temple. It was Passover time, the Jewish holiday that recognized the angel of death in Egypt. Jewish pilgrims came from all over to the great Temple in Jerusalem and thank God for their deliverance from slavery. Currently they are under Roman oppression, the religious leadership has been corrupted by trade and commerce.

The Jewish people who come from different parts of the country for religious observance found that the money changers had moved right into the court of the Temple. They were disobeying the spirit of the Law. To buy animals for their Passover sacrifice, the people had to convert their own currency into the local Temple coin and they were cheated by the money changers at high rates.

The sacredness of the Temple’s purpose for the people was violated. On to this scene, Jesus came, with a whip made from rope; he drove the animals and their keepers out of the courtyard. He dumped the moneychanger’s sacks. All their profits are rolled on to the floor. Jesus overturned their tables. He ordered the keepers of the animals and doves to keep out of the Temple and shouted at them “stop making my Father’s house a marketplace”!

When the people asked Jesus “give us a sign” Jesus told them to destroy the Temple and he will raise it three days. Jesus did not mean the actual building. He referred to the Temple as the place of worship of the true God. They have destroyed the covenant with Yahweh one more time. The situation was this; the temple priest needed money to renovate the building, the way they chose was to compromise the principles of their own faith.

The portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Gospel appointed for this day has proven to be something for interpreters through the years. What we see is the Lord Jesus in a violent rage driving animals and people out of the Temple. Others have been concerned that this public demonstration which had all, to a near riot was most unbecoming of the normal lifestyle of Jesus. Then, of course, there is the additional problem of finding this story in the beginning of the Fourth Gospel, whereas the other gospel writers place this event in Holy Week at the beginning of his passion. The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple helps us to understand several very important aspects of the church and its worship.

When we look at the context, John relates for us that this occasion was during a Passover festival. The Passover attracted worshippers to Jerusalem from all over the world. They came speaking different languages and carrying foreign monies. Enterprising merchants had set up booths and stalls in the Temple to accommodate the travelers coming to worship who needed to exchange their monies to pay their temple taxes and make their contributions. Others were busy selling animals to be used in the sacrifices. To be sure, there was great commotion and excitement.

The temple area covered some 35 acres. With many distractions and restorations, the importance of the Temple's long history in the life of the Hebrew people, one can imagine how important a shrine this was. From the very beginning of the Hebrew people, sacred places had been important to the patriarchs. Then, the tabernacle, the traveling shrine of a tent, had been the center of the life of the Hebrew community. King David gathered the materials for his son Solomon to build the first temple on that holy site, Mount Moriah, where Abraham had offered to sacrifice his son Isaac. The temple had always symbolized for the people the presence of their most holy God, Yahweh. That is why it was so important that after each time the Temple was destroyed that it be restored to proclaim once again the assured presence of the Almighty and Holy One of Israel. The temple was the center of their life and helped to define what it meant to be a Jew. It gave shape and form to the Hebrew worship and to their entire culture.

Wecan imagine what kind of shock waves ran through the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem when Jesus the controversial rabbi created the uproar in the temple area! Into that busy crowd Jesus rushed with a homemade whip of cords and struck out wildly at people and animals to put them into a rout. The reason that the gospel writer John includes this story at the very beginning of his gospel is because he wants to show throughout his gospel that Jesus gave new shape and meaning to the worship life of the people of God. In this very early story John is able to set the stage for all that is to follow in explaining the sacramental character of the worship life of the church. If you would like to learn more, please come to our worship at 11:00 AM on Sunday.

Peace!

Rev. Dr. Christopher Ponnuraj

Minister

West Center Congregational Church

101 Pondfield Road West

Bronxville, NY 10708