

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - B

March 4, 2018

First Reading – Exodus 20:1-17

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 19

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Gospel – John 2:13-25

My dear people of God:

I wish to start our reflection from today's second reading: St. Paul says to the Corinthians, that he offers something that is not based on rationalization nor on wonders: ***“We preach Christ crucified.”*** (1 Cor 1:23). For both Jews and Greeks, Paul offers something higher and more basic: Christ is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

“We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

Brothers and sisters, here we are trying to make sense of what Paul was teaching to his Corinthian converts. He is very direct in his language: Regardless of the sentiments of the Jews and the opinions of Gentiles, that is, regardless of what the Jews required and what Greeks sought after; and in opposition to all their senseless and groundless cavils, Paul continued preaching the doctrine of salvation only by a crucified Christ.

For a more profound appreciation of Paul's teaching, let us look into how a crucified Jesus would become unto the Jews a stumbling block. As was prophesied, it should happen, and it indeed happened.

1. The Jews not only stumbled at the meanness of His birth, parentage, and education, at His ministry, miracles, company and audience; but especially at His suffering and death.

2. It was a stumbling block to them that He should die at all, for they understood out of their law, that **THE CHRIST** would abide forever.
3. It was more so that He should die the death of the cross, by which, according to their law, He appeared to be accursed; and most of all this was stumbling to them, because they expected a temporal kingdom to be set up by Him.

Let us look into how a crucified Christ would become unto the Greeks foolishness.

1. the Greeks scorned at the thought that the “Son of God” should be crucified;
2. that riches should come through His poverty, and men be brought to a kingdom and glory through **ONE** so mean and abject;
3. that there should be life for men in **HIS DEATH**, and salvation through **HIS CRUCIFIXION**;
4. that blessings should come through His being made a curse; and that His death should be an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of men;
5. that justification should be by **ONE** who was condemned;
6. that peace and pardon should be by His blood; and that He should be raised again from the dead.

These things were the subject of their ridicule and banter; which in their opinion, deserved to be laughed at, rather than be credited. We realize that Paul was challenging those who think they were wiser than God.

Today, Paul is telling us to preach (as he did to the Corinthians) the crucifixion of Jesus whether it sounds stupid or not. As a matter of fact it is the very essence of the power of God unto salvation!

Please allow me to digress a bit: let us compare what Paul said in his letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 16 and our second reading. In that aforementioned letter to the Romans, Paul said: *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”*

Paul was so consistent in his teachings to the Corinthian church and to the Roman church. He always preached that the cross of Jesus is the power of God. He noted that when people first hear of this “way of salvation” they had a hard time believing that it could possibly be the power and wisdom of God.

Every “Jew” always wanted to see more; and every “Greek” always wanted more information.

My dear people of God: the crucifix both reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and calls us to join Him in sacrificing ourselves for Him and for His Father's Kingdom. This is not easy, but that is the way of the Lord. Hearing from the first reading, we realize that the Ten Commandments call us to a way of life that is out of tune with much of society.

Respect for parents, fidelity, respect for property, putting God before all else, giving Him a day a week, are all ways that we are distinct from others. To be distinct, to be separate for the Lord, is what we mean when we say, *“We are called to be holy.”* We live these commandments so that ultimately we might not be wrapped up in ourselves. We live these commandments in response to God's preference of us as His chosen people.

Now, let us go to the gospel.

John the Evangelist talks about Jesus going to Jerusalem for the Passover of the Jews. Verse 12 of chapter 2 says that He stayed but a few days at Capernaum, as He wished to be present at the celebration of this feast at Jerusalem.

It would be helpful to think that by the time John wrote his gospel, this feast was no longer observed by the Gentiles and Jewish converts to Christianity, though still retained by the Jews. Moreover, John was now among the Gentiles, for whose sake he wrote this gospel. John therefore so distinguishes this Passover of the Jews as a feast distinct from the recently practiced Christian Passover”.

At this point, brothers and sisters, we have to bear in mind that John was writing about an event in the life of Jesus which was no longer kept by the people for unto whom John wrote. These recent converts had started their own celebration- which became the basis of our own Liturgy now.

John viewed this feast as pointing towards what “the Christ” or the *Lamb of God Who would take away the sins of the world* would do, after taking up His calling as the Messiah. Obviously, John wants us to link it with the Final Passover, and to bring to us an awareness of the fruits that await us already over the ministry of Jesus.

How shall we understand the gospel of today? Writing near the end of the first century, John no longer referred to the Passover as a feast of God, as He commanded in the Book of Exodus, chapter 12, verse 11, but as a "FEAST OF THE JEWS".

Please be mindful that the cleansing of the temple that Jesus did in today's gospel is not the same as the cleansing that He did at the final week of His earthly life on earth. In fact this is the first Passover that Jesus did after starting His three-year public ministry. The final cleansing was mentioned by the other evangelists: in Matthew 21:12f; in Mark 11:15; and in Luke 19:45, after the third year of Jesus' ministry.

Certainly the nearness of the Feast would add significance to Christ's action. While the Jews were purifying themselves for the Passover He purified the Temple. He feels in His new awareness of His Messiahship that He has to do something, for they are treating God's house like a market and making a mockery of the opportunity for Gentiles to truly worship! "*Zeal for your house will eat me up*" (Psalms 69:9). He demonstrated His displeasure with the trading and commerce in His Father's House. This provides an opportunity for Him to hint at His coming death and resurrection: '*Destroy this Temple and I will raise it again in three days*'.

By the current practices of the Jews, THE FEAST has ceased being 'the Lord's Passover as described in the 12th chapter of the Book of Exodus, but the "Passover of the Jews".

It is worth remembering that on the eve of the Passover the head of every family carefully collected all the leaven in the house, and there was a general cleansing. Jesus was doing in His Father's house, it may be, what was then being done in every house in Jerusalem.

In this first cleansing narrated by the evangelist John, Jesus made use of a whip. The way John narrated this dramatic cleansing gives the explanation of the implacable hatred of the Pharisees and other keepers of the temple concessions. This feast which was kept on the fourteenth day of Nisan (*in commemoration of the Lord's passing over the houses of the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt*), when He slew the firstborn in Egypt is called the Passover of the Jews.

Please be aware that we are on Chapter 2 of John's gospel, just after the first miracle that Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. This trip of Jesus to the Temple is His first after He called His first disciples. He is in the Temple not just as a WORSHIPPER but as ONE who had claims to the Temple. He is said to go up to Jerusalem, because that stood on higher ground than the low lands of Galilee, and was the only place where the Passover might be observed.

The expression that Jesus "*went up*" to Jerusalem (John 2:12) as opposed to "*down to*" Capernaum was easy to understand for one who was familiar with the country during John's time.

Grammatically, the direct objects of the verb "find" in verse 14 are the "people selling" and the money-changers, who are mentioned alongside the animal sellers because they assisted in commercial transactions, including the purchase of sacrificial animals. The effect of Jesus' actions in verses 15-16: His driving out the sheep and cattle, if they are included in the "*all*" of verse 15, His pouring out the coins and overturning the tables, His order for the dove-sellers to remove the doves, and for the temple to cease being a marketplace - is to bring the selling to a halt. By taking on the temple's economic apparatus in this way, Jesus assumes the authority to dictate temple practice.

What grants Jesus such authority? Jesus' calling the temple a marketplace is not the most surprising thing He says in verse 16, since commerce was a well-known aspect of the temple's identity. What stands out is His identifying the temple as "*my Father's house.*" This provides the clue for understanding the source of Jesus' authority.

By disrupting the well-established and accepted economic practices of the temple, Jesus publicly reveals He is more than a pilgrim visiting the temple. He is Son of the God who dwells in that temple, and as such He has the authority to disrupt the temple's usual activities. This devotion "*will consume*" *Him* (John 2:17).

John's temple scene begins in verses 13-14 with Jesus as a pilgrim who finds business as usual in the temple, in verses 15-17 it reveals Jesus to be God's zealous Son willing to endure any suffering or hardship that comes as a consequence of His intense devotion to God. Jesus must have burned with a white hot fury as He knocked over tables and, with a whip, drove away the

animals. In a fit of divine rage, He said: “Get out of here! This is my Father’s house. You do not belong here!”

This is sometimes call “righteous anger” or to put it another way: focused anger. The question the Jewish religious authorities (whom John refers to as “the Jews”) posed to Jesus in verse 18 showed they perceived that Jesus’ dramatic temple act was a claim for His authority to represent God. They asked Jesus to validate His authority, expecting that like Moses and Aaron did before the Israelites, He would be able to perform “*signs and wonders*” that authenticate Him as God’s representative (Exodus 4:29-31).

Jesus’ response to their question (verse 19) led to a misunderstanding on their part (verse 20). They saw it as impossible for Jesus to “raise” the temple in three days, given that the temple’s expansion and renovation effort (begun by King Herod in 20 B.C.E.) still had not been completed. To clarify the misunderstanding, John, the gospel writer (verses 21-22) tells us that Jesus was not speaking of the temple at all, but of His body, and that this only becomes clear after the resurrection. In addition to the reference to “three days,” the word “raise” can refer to the raising of a building or the resurrection of a body. In verse 22, the same word for “raise” is used, but it can only refer to Jesus’ resurrection.

My dear people of God: It would be beneficial for us to look into the **TEMPLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT JEW**. If we are to fully understand the statement of Jesus, “destroy this temple” we need to look at the physical temple.

What happens to the blood of all the lambs sacrificed in the Jewish Temple? Well, it turns out the Temple had a drainage system that merged the blood of the lambs with water from the spring on Mount Zion. Blood and water literally flowed from the side of the Temple.

Besides the blood and water there's something more about the Temple that we can see in relation to today's first reading. When Solomon built the original Temple about a thousand years before Jesus, it had an area called the Holy of Holies which housed the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained three objects:

- (1) the manna, that is, the bread from heaven;
- (2) the staff of the priest Aaron (Moses' older brother); and

(3) the tablets of the Ten Commandments

For the Jewish people, the Ten Commandments (The Law), was more than a list of things to do and not to do. The Law is God's great gift leading to freedom. As we heard today, the first commandment says, *"I the Lord am your God who brought you out of Egypt, that place of slavery."*

Slavery is a horrible part of human history, but there is something worse. A person can abuse his freedom, destroy himself and others. We all know people who have become slaves to alcohol, drugs, pornography, and gambling. You name it. There are other more hidden forms of slavery.

Brothers and sisters: Just as the Jews of old acknowledged the Temple as the SOURCE of SALVATION, let us acknowledge Jesus as the Temple. God wants to bring us out of the little Egypt inside us, that place of slavery.

Jesus, Temple of GOD on earth, save us! Amen.