

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
February 7, 2021 Streaming Mass
Lent 3rd Sunday of Year B John 2: 13-25

What could so have aroused Jesus' anger that He moved beyond the power of words to employ the very dramatic and forceful gesture of driving the money-changers from the Temple courtyard? What Jesus does in today's Gospel challenges us to reflect on the role that religion and money play in our lives. Despite all our words and protestations to the contrary, to which do we give our ultimate allegiance? Which is the one we use to decide what really matters in those choices, those inconsequential and those more momentous, that we are forced to make in the course of the day? Which is the "god" that we actually demonstrate we believe in, which is the set of values that we find ourselves "buying into," the spiritual or the materialistic? Which do we imagine will save us, will make our lives complete, will bring fulfillment? The very forceful gesture of Jesus in today's Gospel speaks of the corruption of what was most sacred in His day. It should serve as a reminder that what we hold sacred can just as easily be tainted.

So, what was the betrayal, the contamination, the corruption of values that Jesus protested? It was that what was going on inside the Temple, the worship of God, was supposed to transform what was going on outside. In fact, it turned out to be the very opposite. It seems that commerce and religion had found a very comfortable mix within the temple precincts. The people of Jesus' day assumed that they could have dual loyalties—that they could divide life into its material and spiritual spheres and all would be well. But what happened was that the assumptions of commerce had come to dominate the forms of faith. There developed a sense that God could be bargained with, i.e., by making the appropriate sacrifice, God could be bought off; one could make a deal with God; one could then have God in one's pocket, as it were. Here religion was reduced to a business transaction just like everything else—reduced to the same exchange of goods and services that characterizes all the other deals we make in life. The sense of the Sacred, of the Transcendent, of the One who is the source of truth and justice had been lost. Now the claims of God are negotiated in the same way that any contract is arrived at. The majesty of God has been swallowed up by the wheeling and dealing practices of ordinary business.

We see the moral outrage of Jesus at the impoverishment and domesticization of the religion of His day. Religion no longer stood for anything substantially different in life. Instead of religious values being the scale upon everything else is weighed, religion has been co-opted into becoming just one more strategy by which people try

to organize their lives. Religion had become a subtle form of magic, an attempt to manipulate God, rather than the arena where one faces God and undergoes a change of heart, where one grows in one's humanity and one's awareness of being a child of God. Instead, it was just one more system of control and manipulation over the vagaries of human existence, rather than the place wherein one allows oneself to become vulnerable, to surrender the need to be always in charge of the situation, with a more chastened estimation of one's ability to alter reality in line with one's personal preferences.

So much for the religion of Jesus day, what about our own? Is our faith so domesticated by the conventional wisdom of our day that it is in danger of losing its soul? Have we fallen into the trap of believing that the way we do business has nothing to do with the way we conduct our spiritual lives? Have we assumed an uncritical stance about so many of the values of our society that they may insidiously be eating away at the fabric of our faith? Do we cultivate those spiritual values that can give a direction and purpose to our lives, or do we allow those same spiritual values to be repackaged along the lines of profitability, convenience and disposability.

Throughout His ministry, by His words, His deeds, by His healing of those who are sick, Jesus very directly and very deliberately undermined the conventional wisdom of the day—the assumptions about who were “in” and who were “out,” who were counted as good and who were condemned as wicked—a system built upon power, prestige, wealth, performance, judgment and religiosity. So, it was inevitable that Jesus would be on a “collision-course” with the Temple in Jerusalem, since it was the Temple and its form of worship that was the linchpin of the whole way of thinking that He had preached against—the place where the God who was Judge and Ruler could be paid off with sacrificial offerings for one's sins, just as in society anyone might pay off some powerful individual whom one had offended. The God whom Jesus spoke of in the parables set no store in so many of the distinctions we are inclined to make—those “us” versus “them” distinctions. God is revealed as having no need of such sacrifices, since the God whom Jesus called “Father” was loving and compassionate, and sought only evidence of the same in the lives of those who came to worship in the Temple. As the prophet Micah had said centuries before, “This is what the Lord requires of you: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God (6:8).” That's what it's all about. It's not that complicated.

Today's gospel reminds us that there is still a “collision course” between the conventional wisdom of our day with its emphasis on power, prestige, money, and control and the message of Jesus which is one of trust, openness, compassion and vulnerability. The Temple in Jerusalem was in fact destroyed and has not been rebuilt

to this day. The body of Jesus was destroyed on the cross of Calvary but was raised on Easter Sunday to become the foundation of a new spiritual Temple, one not built with human hands, in which people would worship "in spirit and in truth." That is the Temple we will enter in to in a few moments as we celebrate the Eucharist together, as we join our prayer to that of the risen Christ, asking that His Spirit come to transform our hearts and our world.