3rd Sunday of Lent  
Cycle B, 3.4.18  
Exodus 20:1-17/ 1 Corinthians 1:22-25/  
John 2:13-25

**A BREECH OF DECORUM?  
OR A PROPHET’S PREROGATIVE?**

Certain images and signs make an impact around the world. They may shock those who see them and they can also have a lasting influence on public opinion. A prime example is the lifeless body of that little five-year-old Syrian child deposited by the waves on a Mediterranean beach three years ago — a devastating image that showed the world the plight of immigrants searching for freedom. Further back in time, in 1989, the image of the Chinese student on Tiananmen Square, arms stretched wide to stop the tanks of the Chinese army, captured our imaginations and showed us the depths of courage. Then there was the completely unexpected gesture of German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970, who knelt before the monument honoring the Jews who died during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

But what did it symbolize in the culture of its time two thousand years ago? Roman coins, the currency of the day, were stamped with the head of Caesar and sometimes with the image of pagan gods. This made them unfit for Jewish temple use, so money changing became indispensable. The Jews, who came from around the world for major feasts, probably did not bring along animals for sacrifice, and so the sellers provided a necessary service.

All of this activity took place within the temple precincts, a vast area that included the outer court and the court of the gentiles, but not the sanctuary or the temple proper. Why was Jesus so upset? He accused the merchants of making the temple a marketplace, but a part of it really was a marketplace. The transactions were legitimate, they were conducted in the appropriate temple area, and they were essential supports of the temple service. Jesus, always the prophet, was fulfilling what the prophet Zechariah said: At the end-time there would be no need for merchants in the house of the Lord. The disciples remembered the passage from the
psalms: “Zeal for your house consumed me.” So Jesus is making a double claim.

First, by driving the merchants out of the temple precincts, he announces that the time of fulfillment has come. Second, by identifying God as his Father Jesus affirms his right to make such a claim and to act on it. The temple authorities want more justification, so Jesus predicts his death and resurrection: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again.” They failed to understand and our gospel ends with an accurate testimony about them and about us: “Jesus did not need anyone to testify about human nature; he himself understood it well.” It is our human nature with all our misgivings and faulty reasoning, our lack of comprehension and our resistance to conversion that Jesus came to cleanse and purify.

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Dr. Sherwin Nuland was a clinical professor of surgery at Yale University, where he taught bioethics and medical history. He was a practicing surgeon for 30 years, treating upwards of 10,000 patients. His first book, How We Die, won the National Book Award. In later years, he delved deeply into his sense of wonder at the human body’s capacity to sustain life and to support our pursuits of order and meaning. After the success of his book, Dr. Nuland turned his attention to the infinite variety of processes that maintain human life moment to moment. He was particularly intrigued by just one of the body’s minute processes, the DNA repair enzyme.

He wrote this about that repair enzyme: “Here we are with our 75 trillion cells. It’s been estimated there are about 4 million cell divisions every single second. (You’re working so hard while you’re sitting here.) And when cells divide, of course it’s impossible for the DNA to replicate perfectly each time, so little mistakes are made. You know, this is how mutations arise. The DNA repair enzyme is a molecule. It’s a complex molecule. It travels like a little motorboat up and down the DNA molecule. It finds errors, snips them out, corrects them, and puts the right thing back in there. This is the ultimate wisdom of the body.”

I thought about Dr. Nuland’s fascination with this “repair enzyme” as I reflected on today’s gospel – Jesus tossing out the offenders who were profaning the sacredness of the Temple. It seemed to be Jesus’ lot in life to be like a “repair enzyme.” He walked through the hillsides and country lanes surrounding Palestine and Galilee adjusting people’s attitudes and correcting their misunderstandings about God and God’s kingdom. Then, what were the attitudes Jesus was correcting is this symbolic action of the cleansing of the Temple? First, there is the issue of the animals, which symbolize the range of sacrifices offered to God. They represent and “replace,” so to speak, sinful humans who wish to obtain forgiveness. In this sense, doesn’t the fact that Jesus drove the animals out of the Temple enclosure indicate that the time for bloody rites is now ended?

From now on, the one in the middle of the Temple will be the person whom John the Baptist designated as “the lamb of God.” No longer will human offerings be necessary to wipe away sin. God himself in Christ now comes to meet us and takes responsibility for removing everything that
separates us from him. Salvation is a gift and not the outcome of our sacrifices.

As for the money, this refers to another more obscure question. Is it possible to trade with God? Can we adopt a particular kind of behavior so that we can be on good terms with God? For all our good works and sacrifices, for all our Lenten resolutions, even for our generosity to the poor, to the support of the Church, our faithful participation in the worship of the community? None of these endeavors, as important and inspirational as they are, buy our way into God’s good graces. That “amazing grace” that sets us free is a free gift from God, given to us long before we think we’ve earned it. Jesus’ intervention in the temple scene clarifies the tension between two possible conceptions. Is the Temple “the house of the Father,” that is, a house of confidence, or is it a “center of trade?”

And what about the Temple itself? Jesus evokes the destruction of this sanctuary in order to build another in its place. This new sanctuary will bear the marks of a new Paschal feast. Jesus resurrected will become the new Temple, the resting place of the Most High. There will no longer be any need for such a building to assemble the people. Christ himself will gather humanity for the praise of the Father, a humanity saved from death by his own Paschal sacrifice and renewed in the force of the Holy Spirit. God’s grace and power is not revealed in lofty precepts or in magnificent stones but rather in the broken and pierced body of Jesus Christ. This Sunday of Lent we are given the opportunity to discover whether we consider these claims empty foolishness, stumbling blocks or the ground of our faith – a faith we try to put into practice in our daily lives.

John Kasper, OSFS