

HOMILY LENT 3B (& SCRUTINY-A) 11 MAR 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

B HOMILY

One of the unpleasant tasks a pastor performs is dealing w/ angry people. For pastoral ministry involves working with people. And people get angry. And anger is an ugly emotion. As the apostle James observed, a man's or a woman's (to be inclusive) anger does not fulfill God's justice. So there are some ugly moments now and then in the ministry of a priest. Moreover, anger is often unjustified. An individual may simply be misinformed about an issue and get all worked up about nothing. Or folks may be unreasonable in their expectations and get incensed when they are not satisfied. In other instances, the anger is misdirected. Some fellow has a grievance w/ another parishioner, but grouches to the pastor about the issue instead of confronting the offender directly. Then there are those with an ax to grind against the Catholic Church. Because the priest symbolizes the Church, he becomes the lightning rod for their fulminations. A particularly troublesome dimension of anger is that it is highly contagious: the pastor grows frustrated by the unreasonable nature of the aggrieved party or the unwarranted character of the criticism and becomes angry himself. All that being said, there are times when the anger of people is justified. And as unpleasant as it may be, the pastor has the responsibility to hear them out. In some cases, an apology is in order. In others, the pastor can offer options for just recourse. In many instances, the best we can offer is human condolences and the gospel hope of a God who makes it all right in his providential time.

Human anger is an unpleasant, but real and sometimes necessary fact of life. There are times when anger serves the good purpose of spurring people to constructive action that makes the world a better, more just and equitable place. When we turn our attention to the realm of the divine, we find that God is not infrequently portrayed as angry. In fact, in the OT he's described as angry quite often. He gets angry at the sins of the human race and the infidelity of the chosen people; and the ensuing floods, plagues, wars, pestilences, and other assorted miseries are interpreted as expressions of divine outrage. There's enough talk about the wrath of God in the pages of the Sacred Scriptures to fuel many a fire and brimstone sermon, so much so that in the past the image a lot of worshipers formed of God was the big bad Avenger ready to zap careless transgressors w/ fearsome thunderbolts in reprisal for their misconduct. Clearly this one-sided portrayal of a vindictive deity neglects the compassionate and forgiving aspects of his character which also shine forth on the Sacred Page. Nonetheless, an attentive reading of the Holy Bible discloses a God who gets angry and does for good reason. Moreover, it should be observed that when God enters the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, we find that he gets angry as well: he hurls sharp words of critique at his religious adversaries and stinging rebukes at unbelieving towns. In today's gospel, he's angry yet again. Jesus is so aggrieved about the commercial transactions occurring in the Temple that he cleans house.

Clearly, the Lord's anger is justified--after all, he's God and cannot sin. What's less clear is the motivation for his prophetic action. We tend to assume that the assorted vendor stands in the Temple area were as out of place as drug dealers in a school zone, but it was not that simple at all. The merchants' business was intimately connected with the Temple cult. Worshipers going to the Temple to make holocausts and other sacrifices had need of animals to offer. Obviously it would be impractical to cart them all the way from the farthest reaches of Israel. So there was a genuine need for a market of sorts to supply the requirements of ritual sacrifice. And so when Jesus of far-flung Nazareth appeared in the religious capital of Judea and went about driving the merchants away and breaking their furniture, the religious authorities who had sanctioned this arrangement asked quite logically who this outsider thought he was. As they phrased it, by what authority did he do these things. Jesus' explanatory response presupposes his unique relationship with God the Father. The Temple is his Father's house. He as the Father's Son has the authority to arrange the furnishings, so to speak, as he deems fit in his Father's house, so that the sanctuary does not degenerate into a marketplace; in fact, as Jesus explains elsewhere, he only does what the Father himself wants him to do. And this unique relationship Jesus enjoys with God will be validated when the temple of his body will be destroyed by his enemies but then raised up again on the 3rd day by divine power.

During Lent, we're inviting Jesus into our own personal temples, as it were. And if we be honest, the Lord probably has some housecleaning to do. As it was with the Temple of Jesus' day, it's all too easy to rationalize the status quo in our souls as being clean enough. Lord knows that the human capacity for self-deception hasn't diminished much in 2000 years! In this holy season of Lent, the Church invites all her children to take a closer look at their hearts. During this Lent, let's allow the good Lord inside so he can get to work, so that we can become the

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holy people he calls us to be. The sacrament of Penance is an excellent way to let the Lord enter and purify our spirits. Now I recognize that Penance is a bit unsettling, and that's understandable. Because Penance is where sinners meet the all holy God who is offended by sin, whose only Son died on the cross for the crimes which each of us is guilty of. Every time we look at the crucified, we must acknowledge the blood is on our hands. That's ok. The sorrow that should be evoked from such meditations is ultimately meant to bring healing and peace. We invite the Lord Jesus to enter our hearts, because comes not to plunder or destroy our temple. Rather, he comes to make it clean and beautiful, a place where God is worshiped in spirit and in truth.

A HOMILY:

Not so long ago, there was a slogan for some brand of beverage: Obey your thirst! It is an apt expression of our consumer culture where advertising caters to every appetite imaginable. If only we eat the right food, or drink the right beverage, or own the right car, everything will be all right; all we have to do is pay for it. All we need do is spend, buy, acquire, consume, and life will be great. At least that's what the commercials promise.

The woman in the gospel has a long history of obeying her thirst. Her thirsts, her longings, her cravings have led her on a long and winding path to her present plight. But alas, she has been rather indiscriminating in her tastes. She has obeyed her thirst for human affection and has sought happiness in the arms of several husbands. Perhaps she has grown disillusioned w/ the failed promises of marital bliss, so now she seeks satisfaction in the arms of another man in a less formal arrangement. The woman is actually a church-going sort, by the way. She has tried to quench her thirst for the divine by worshiping the God of Jacob upon Mt. Gerizim, albeit in a shrine unrecognized and in a manner unsanctioned by the orthodox Jewish religion; she is actually like a lot of our contemporaries, for she worships God in her own way, which, as the Lord points out, means she does not understand what she is doing. Between the lines of the narrative we espy the unhappy figure of a disappointed soul whose deepest thirsts remain unquenched. Her tedious routine of trekking back and forth to the well symbolizes the futility of a life spent squandering her precious energies in vain pursuit of deceptive pleasures.

This evening, a few from our assembly celebrate the Rite of the First Scrutiny as they prepare to be received into the Church this Easter. They have come to our community because their souls are athirst for the living God, and they sense that within the Catholic fold is where this God can best be found. The good news is that they have come to the right place. For our Maker has fashioned every human being for himself; and so every human heart is restless until it rests in Christ. Within the Catholic Church, Christ is made present in the plenitude of his grace and truth: his teachings are proclaimed through the Magisterium, his graces communicated thru the saving sacraments of faith. For these candidates, these elect, as they are called, indeed for us all, tonight is an apt occasion to scrutinize our thirsts. For like the Samaritan woman of old, our hearts too can be deceived by the siren songs of false deities who claim to satisfy a longing that only the God of Jesus Christ can fulfill. Let's pray for them, let's pray for ourselves, that the Spirit of truth may enlighten our minds to see in Jesus the glory of God which grants peace and joy beyond measure, and strengthen our hearts to reach out and embrace him.