

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday March 3 2024

The Third Sunday in Lent

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

+

Jesus – ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all.’
(Ephesians 1:23b)

Michael Ramsey, 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, used to teach that there is a natural order of things in creation; if you will, the order that things are meant to be. He expressed this as God – Man – Things. However, this became *disordered* with God moved to the bottom of the natural order and, even more dangerously, with *Things*, including weapons of mass destruction at the top. The Bible shows us that this natural order to creation very quickly unraveled because of humankind’s willful disobedience, resulting in estrangement from God the Creator. In the Church, we call this *the Fall from grace*.

The message of the Old Testament is God calling his people back to himself in a covenant relationship. A covenant is a kind of ‘contract’ between God and people in which an agreement is made. Put very simply, God says, “Do *this* and I will treat you as my very own and I will protect you.” The ten commandments that we heard in our First Lesson are at the heart of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai – they were the tools by which a very diverse people – 12 tribes - could become one family under God – his chosen people – a beloved community, where the relationships between them reflected the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people. The carrying of the Ark of the Covenant with its tablets of the Law contained within was a symbol of God walking with his pilgrim people. Like the nomadic tribes that constituted God’s chosen people, the Ark was kept in a tent called a tabernacle. God *tabernacled* with his people on the move. It was only when they settled in the Promised Land that they built a Temple in Jerusalem which, like the Tabernacle in the wilderness, was a sign of the God’s covenant relationship with his people, and a means by which they could deepen their relationship with him. The blood of sacrifice offered there atoned for their sins, but because they were so often *not* in a state of grace, those sacrifices had to be offered again and again and again.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus comes to that Temple and does something quite extraordinary. We know that the author of John chooses his images and words carefully; the Fourth Gospel is not like the three synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For a start, in John’s Gospel we have a *three-year* ministry as opposed to one, and this passage comes at the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry in John’s Gospel, where in the synoptic Gospels it comes just before Holy Week after the triumphant entry on the day that we call Palm Sunday. This placing of the cleansing of the Temple is very deliberate. We have heard the great Prologue with its echoes of the first story of Creation “*In the beginning was the Word...*” culminating in the declaration that this Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so that we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth. After the call of the first disciples, we have the first of seven *signs* in John’s Gospel. John deliberately uses the word *sign* rather than miracle. The first of these signs takes place at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, with the turning of the water into wine. Weddings are about covenanted relationships, and the stone water jars are for purification according to the Law. They are empty, so Jesus has them filled to the brim with water and

they become filled with wine, but not any old wine – the *best wine*. We are told that this was the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory, so his going to the Temple almost immediately after that sign is going to be charged with symbolic meaning. The Word made Flesh, the splendor of the Father, filled with Grace and Truth, who has revealed his glory to mere mortals, enters the very place that represented God's covenanted relationship with his chosen people – the Temple – *and Jesus is filled with zeal, and he does so just before the Passover* – the feast to remind God's people of liberation from slavery.

Filled with zeal, which is different from the emotion anger, Jesus makes a whip of cords and drives out those selling animals intended for sacrifice, and the moneychangers, and even overturns the moneychangers' tables. Now, this is not some kind of protest; Jesus is not acting like a protester against climate change; this is not the start of the occupy movement; this is far more significant, for the Word made Flesh goes into the place of God's presence *as* God's presence, filled with grace and truth. And, for a brief while, the sacrifices stop. Think about it - the driving out of the money-changers and the animals and birds means that, for a little while there could be no sacrifices. Why? Because the greatest sign of the restoration of God's sovereignty over creation, and the healing of the broken relationship between God and humanity is in the person of Jesus Christ who, in himself, would become the *perfect sacrifice* to bring about reconciliation once and for all. "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,*" says Jesus but, of course, he did not mean the physical Temple which, after all, when John's Gospel was written had been destroyed for two or three decades. Jesus was talking about his own sacrificial death and his own resurrection in which there would be a new creation. For Jesus, the Temple pointed to the reality of God's presence, but when Jesus entered that Temple, he filled it *with* his own presence

In just three weeks, we will walk again the road to Calvary in order to celebrate the Resurrection – the new creation. And that celebration of the Lord Passion, Death, and Resurrection should make a difference to our lives. Don't be like those people who call themselves Christians, but for whom Good Friday is an inconvenience. Easter Day may be glorious, but without Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, it loses so much of its power. Why? Paul tells us in our Epistle reading today: "*We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" You see, my friends, walking the way of the Cross is counter-cultural, perhaps especially today. But we proclaim Christ Crucified which is why we can celebrate his Resurrection – the means by which the whole of creation is transformed and by which each of us can reach our full potential to be called the children of God, and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, in a beloved community that is like his glorified body, but a body that still bears the wounds of love. For it is the eternal freshness of the wounds of love that is our encouragement to become more like him who is the very image of God. Or, as Archbishop Oscar Romero once said,

*"When we leave Mass, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mount Sinai: with his face shining, and his heart brave and strong, to face the world's difficulties."*¹

¹ Sermon preached on June 17, 1979