

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome A/2008

When we grow up as kids, we nourish a lot of dreams we would like to fulfill when we become adults. Among many other things we long for, we wish to have a wonderful job, a beautiful family and, most importantly, a decent house. For many people to have a house is not just a question of having a place of living and accommodation, but it means providing oneself with a shelter, where one can feel protected against possible bad weather and a refuge from where one can organize his or her life.

This feast of the dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome we celebrate today draws our attention to the importance of the house of the Lord as that dwelling place of God among his people, from where his blessings flow on his people, and that gathering place where his people praise and worship him.

All today's readings focus on that reality of the house of the Lord as a place of prayer and worship. The first reading describes a vision the prophet Ezekiel had had as the angel of the Lord brought him to the temple in the night. From all over the four facades of the temple, water came out toward the land and the sea. Whatever the water touched was regenerated and received life and healing.

The meaning of this vision is that the presence of the Lord in the temple is a blessing. It reveals itself as life-giving and creative power. In order to understand this point, we have to remember that water in the dry countries all over the world, especially in the East, is a powerful symbol of blessing and abundance. Without water there is no life at all. If, then, water comes out of the temple and transforms everything, it means that because of the One who dwells in it and gives life, the temple is a place of encounter with the Lord, a house of blessing, healing and prayer.

All that helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus, taken by the zeal for the house of his Father, drove out of the temple the merchants and stallholders with a cord. But why did Jesus come to overturn oxen, sheep, doves and the table of money-changers? Were these activities legitimate or not?

These activities in the temple were not unlawful; they were allowed by the Law. In fact, in order to worship in the temple, people needed animals to be offered for the sacrifice as required by the book of Leviticus. However, how could the atmosphere in the temple be contemplative and reverential when economic interests prevail over God's worship? Of course, some would come in the temple with a real intention of worshipping God. But others also would be interested only in their profits and commercial benefits. It is in this context that we have to understand Jesus' anger and reaction.

If so, we can say that Jesus was pushed to act in such a way because God's house was being desecrated. It means, in other words, that those who came in the temple worshiped without reverence of the sacred place, which is the dwelling place of God. Worship without reverence is a worship that does not realize the holiness of God and which is formalistic. It is a worship in which reverence and the true function of God's house are forgotten.

Jesus acted as he did in order to show us that with him, the whole panoply of animals offered in the temple had become irrelevant. No sacrifice of animal can ever put someone right with God. Rather, the true sacrifice to God is our very self. That is why the true worship of God is done in spirit and in truth, and not that which is formal and external. God is not interested in hypocritical display, but in sincere contrition of heart and conversion.

Moreover, by driving out the merchants from the temple, Jesus reminds us that our relationship with God is not a matter of trade. Anytime we forget this truth we degrade religion by using it for economic interests. This is a permanent temptation before us. Sometimes, I feel embarrassed when after a séance of pastoral counseling someone asks of me: “How much, Father, shall I pay you”? I do not sell the service I offer. If someone would like to support me or the Church, that is fine. But, my service is not to being sold.

By driving out of the temple money-changers and those who were with them, Jesus wanted to purify the temple so that it would gain its original meaning as a place of prayer, healing and blessing. This particular point challenges us profoundly about our attitude in the Church before, during and after the Holy Mass. I know that given the way our society functions, it is not always easy to frequently meet friends and socialize. In that sense, Sunday becomes an opportunity to meet friends we did not see in the week and chat a little bit about some issues of life. However, we should not forget that the Church is a place of prayer, not only during the Mass, but anytime.

The last point I would like to bring is relative to the destruction of the temple Jesus is talking about: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”. Remember, a house does not have only a physical meaning; it can have also a symbolic or a spiritual meaning. Sometimes we say of people who hardly open to others that they are locked in themselves. In this regard, a person can be like a house.

According to this understanding, the temple is not only a Church or a chapel, but we, as individuals, are ourselves the temples of the presence of the Lord. That’s what St Paul reminds us in the second reading. We must become ourselves the place where God dwells. With Christ as the corner stone, we must accept willingly to be turned into living and holy stones of the new temple of God. May we always do that so that God might be glorified in whatever we do for the glory of his name! God bless you all!

Ezekiel 47, 1-2, 8-9, 12; 1 Corinthians 3, 9c-11, 16-17; John 2, 13-22



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