

LTS Tshwane, Devotion Monday, March 6: John 2:13-22

Jesus clears the Temple. We have known this story for long. When I was a boy, I admired how tough Jesus was, how boldly He acted how strongly He campaigned against those dealers, merchants, and salespeople. I thought I understood why Jesus was so angry at them. Were they not perverting the sacred purpose of the Temple, and the holy function of Israel's sanctuary? Was Jesus not quite right in driving them all out, throwing them out of the place that was meant for worship, prayer, and adoration? Of course He was the One who could not stand them to change His Father's house into a market place. Yes, I was sympathetic with this raging, aggressive, courageous Jesus the drawings in my children's bible depicted. I felt happy to see Jesus as my hero.

Still there was something I had not understood correctly. For, I did not see myself in the picture. I was an observer, uninvolved. I was looking from afar, a bystander thinking: That serves them right, those "capitalists", "exploiters", "deceivers"! They deserved what they got, being whipped out of God's house, being cast out of the place that was God's own. You see, I was pointing at these others, blaming them for doing wrong, condemning them because of their greed and avarice. But I did not realize that this gospel was a story about me, too.

Jesus clears the Temple in Jerusalem. He does so in order to stop the malpractice that those tradespeople did to this holy place. He does so in order to bring it back to the usage that it was meant for. At the same time, He restores it to its true and only owner, namely God. And in addition, by His doing so, His opponents found the legal title to accuse Him and finally to condemn Him and have Him crucified. That was the pay Jesus received for doing his duty as a faithful Son to His heavenly Father. In what Jesus' disciples remembered from Psalm 69, this link is manifest: The zeal Jesus had to have for His Father's house, indeed, was apt to serve as a pretext to his enemies for accusing Him of blasphemy. In this sense, Jesus was consumed, ruined, and finally destroyed by His fervor for the Temple. His suffering and dying was but a logical consequence to this bold and heroic action of His.

Now, how does this story of Jesus clearing the Temple apply to us? The Jerusalem sanctuary was destroyed long ago when the Romans in the year 70 A.D. razed the city to the ground. Nonetheless, the New Testament speaks about a temple that we belong to, moreover, a temple that we are. The Christian Church is labeled the "temple of the living God" (II Cor. 6:16), as St. Paul says: "For we are the temple of the living God". The Church is seen as a building, meant "to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). And we, the Christians are chosen to be built into this "spiritual house" "like living stones" (I Pet. 2:5). Moreover, we, as being Christians, in our bodies are "temple[s] of the Holy Spirit who is in us (I Cor. 6:19).

Don't you think that this "temple of the living God" would need to be cleaned and cleared time and again? Don't you think that we also need to be purged and cleansed now and then? Surely, when we look at God's Church as it is meant to be, then it is pure, clean, and holy in the eyes of God, because then it is seen as the body of Christ, consisting of true believers,

incorporated into Him by Holy Baptism, cleansed from all sin. But when we look at the Church as it presents itself in history, even as early as in New Testament times, we find it quarreling, deviating from the path God has provided for His people, going astray in terms of doctrine and ethics, being fooled by heretics, being misled by leaders to conform to the patterns of this world.

In former days, the “Clearing of the Temple”-story used to be read on Reformation Day, and not by chance so. Because the Reformation in its self-understanding was not founding a new church, rather it aimed at renewing it by going back to the scriptural teaching and linking to the doctrines of the ancient church, and at the same time purifying the medieval church from aberrations, heresies, false teaching, abuse of pontifical, episcopal, and clerical power. It seems as though it is no longer read on this occasion, maybe due to the insight that the churches of the Reformation themselves need to be purified time and again from aberrations, that have crept into them unnoticed, or have been welcomed even openheartedly by liberal theologians and mainstream church bodies.

For sure, it cannot be denied, according to Martin Luther, that the Church, like the Wittenberg reformer puts it, is “maxima peccatrix” – the biggest sinner of all. No doubt about that, as the church consists of sinners, justified sinners however. Yet, according to the sinner-saint-paradigm, the believers are holy people because through faith they are linked to Christ, embodied into Him and thus pure and in the eyes of God. But looking at ourselves honestly, we find that sin is still residing in our hearts and minds: There are tendencies rooted deeply within us that strive decidedly against God’s will; there are trends around us in society that allure us to leave the path God has chosen for us to go; there are options we would like to follow – and oftentimes even do so – that are in clear contrast to God’s commandments. Could anyone of you honestly deny this diagnosis? Oh, I know all too well, that I do not like to be identified as someone to slide back in to sin. No – I abhor the idea of only being half-heartedly ready and willing to obey God and to follow the plan God has in store for me – especially if that plan of God’s contradicts and counteracts the ideas that I would like to pursue. Nonetheless it is a matter of fact that I am still tending to fall into relapse and to activate old patterns I should have abandoned long ago. There is no reason for us to boast in the strength of our faith, nor is there any reason to pride ourselves in the alleged excellence of our Christian way of living.

That is why God has to be working at me, calling for wholehearted repentance, asking for sincere remorse, bidding me to look at myself in an undisguised way. Then I will acknowledge how dearly I need to be purified, cleansed and cleared by God Himself. Over and over again, He is forced to confront me with His holy will; over and over again, He is compelled to show me that I am not living like a child of God ought to behave; over and over again, He has to take pity on my; and over and over again, He is willing to release me from the burden of my sin; over and over again, He is eager to forgive – for Christ’s sake. A judgment, however, takes place. But it aims at nothing else than God’s lovingkindness

towards us. And this is precisely the way God cleanses and cleans us, so we are able to stand before Him without being condemned.

So the Jerusalem Temple had to be cleared, the Church, as it is, has to be cleared being determined to be the “temple of the living God”, and we ourselves have to be cleared by Christ in order to become more and more the place where our Lord and Savior would like to dwell. In Jerusalem, Jesus was asked the question on the grounds of which authority he acted like He did. His answer was a conundrum to those who first heard it, including the disciples. Only after Easter they came to understand what Christ had meant when He had talked about the destruction of the Temple and its reconstruction within three days’ time. It is the Temple of His body that had to be destroyed and to be raised again, because only Christ’s suffering and death could provide satisfaction for the sins of the world and achieve reconciliation between God and humankind. It was only His sacrifice that was able work atonement and to produce a thorough reassessment of our relationship with God, rather, of God’s relationship with us.

It is this ultimate effort in which Christ has offered up Himself, which provides the legal title of our redemption. For it is the blood of Jesus that “purifies us from all sin”, like John puts it in his first letter (I Jn. 1:7). Therefore the clearing, cleaning and cleansing of God’s temple, applied to the Church Militant, and to us as living stones incorporated in God’s “spiritual house” (I Pet. 2:5), has to continue to the Last Day. Otherwise the Church would have ceased to exist long ago, and we would be lost in our sinfulness. Grateful, at any rate, we should be that Christ does not cease to do His cleaning work with us nor does He stop His enduring task of purifying His Church wrought by the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament. Thanks be to God that He incessantly and untiringly is at work to sanctify us, so that we become more and more, and indeed are people “on whom His favor rests” (Lk. 2:14). Amen