

Sunday March 4th, 2018

Lent III

PRAYER: O Holy One of Israel, in Christ you call us to dwell in your favour; we gather to praise you and worship your name. You are the rock that keeps us from falling, the redeemer who can save us from sin. You set us upon the sure foundation of your commandments; you cleanse us from all unrighteousness through the gift of your Son. Accept our words as we honour your judgment and be pleased with our worship as we respond to Christ's call. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: God is a God of justice and mercy; God's way commands our obedience; his grace gives us encouragement. We can do nothing apart from the blessing God bestows. Alive with the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can be bold to offer what we have as a sign of our devotion. May God accept what we bring, and multiply its effectiveness, for the sake of Jesus, your gift to us.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

BENEDICTION: Go forth among your neighbours as ambassadors of the Lord, your eyes enlightened with God's commandments, your minds quickened with God's testimonies, your hearts rejoicing in God's law, and your souls aflame with God's love. Amen.

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John 2:13-25

“Zeal for the Lord.”

There was a couple whose twenty-something son was still living with them. The parents were a little worried, as their son had yet to decide on a career, so they decided to conduct a little experiment. They put a ten-dollar bill, a Bible, and a bottle of whiskey on the front hall table. Then they hid, pretending they were not at home. The father said, “If our son takes the money, he will be a businessman; if he takes the Bible, he will be a minister; but if he takes the bottle of whiskey, I’m afraid our son will be a drunk.

So, the parents stayed in the nearby closet and waited nervously. Peeking through the keyhole, they saw their son arrive. The son saw what they had left and took the ten-dollar bill, looked at it against the light, and slid it in his pocket. After that he took the bible, flipped through it, and took it. Finally, he grabbed the bottle of whiskey, opened it, and took a sniff to make sure it was good quality. Then he left for his room, carrying all three.

The father slapped his forehead, and said, “It’s even worse than I could ever have imagined—our son is going to be a politician!” I can think of no other profession that is so maligned than that of a politician. No other profession seems to be the brunt of so many jokes, criticisms and outright hostility. No matter how sincere, how wise, or how charismatic a politician is, they are always under a great cloud of suspicion.

Perhaps you have heard the little story about advice columnist Ann Landers who was attending a reception at foreign embassy. She was approached by a pompous, arrogant U. S. senator who said to her, “So you’re the famous Ann Landers. Say something funny.” Without missing a beat, she replied, “Well you’re a politician. Tell me a lie.” We laugh but we share her sentiment. Every time a politician promises something or makes an announcement we wonder what the truth is, or what their ulterior motive is.

I think we all understand that politics often demands that you make compromises, and try as hard as you can to please the public regardless of the consequences. Case in point is the Toronto Star’s article this past Monday (Feb. 26) which reported on a 75-minute rambling speech given by US President Trump at the CPAC or Conservative Political Action Conference. Which is his political base.

In this particular one speech the President made, I kid you not, twenty, out right false claims. In this week alone, he has made 44 false claims, and since his presidency began he has made a whopping 1,218 false claims. One such claim that effects Canada is as follows, and I quote, “We just can’t let countries—as an example, Mexico. We have a \$100 billion trade deficit with Mexico. What does that tell you? NAFTA is no good.”

Trump is actually off by \$29 million, as the deficit is actually \$71 billion on goods alone, but when services are added in, the number is considerable lower. You can find a complete list of these false statements on the Toronto Star website, if you so care. This is the nature of politics, say or do whatever you want to advance your own agenda.

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I share this train of thought with you because of something very profound that I've just discovered about the well-known story of Jesus cleansing the temple. As I was preparing for this week's sermon, I ran across an observation by the biblical scholar Epstein. Epstein raises the question of why the animals were in the temple in the first place.

Now I had always believed that the animals were there as a matter of course. The temple officials allowed and even promoted the sale of sacrificial animals and the changing of money, as a service to the faithful who came to worship. I also was under the impression that this arrangement was profitable to the temple officials who took their cut of the hyper-inflated prices and less than fair exchange rates. Now some of this is likely true but it doesn't fully answer the question of why the animals were there.

Epstein points out that the presence of the animals was very risky in terms of the purity of the temple. There was no other place in all of Israel where the demands of holiness were more imperative than the temple. So, if an animal got loose, say a lamb, and this little Serta mattress mascot made its way into the sanctuary and Lord forbid the "Holy of Holies" the whole temple would be made unclean.

Epstein points out that until AD 30 the policy was one of prudent separation of animals from the temple and was in fact the way things were. Historical records indicate that until AD 30 all the animals for sacrifices and the money changers were relegated to the Jerusalem market in the Kidron Valley or on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Worshipers therefore bought their sacrifices on the way to the temple, not actually in it.

So, something must have happened in AD 30 to change all of this and Epstein points out that it was due to politics. In AD 30, Caiaphas was the High Priest who sought complete control of the temple, and also the Jewish court called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin despised Caiaphas, and when meetings at the temple became intolerable because of Caiaphas' interference, the Sanhedrin moved their meetings to the marketplace.

Epstein suggests, that Caiaphas was furious with their departure from the temple, and his loss of influence in the court, so out of spite, he decided to punish the merchants who showed hospitality to the Sanhedrin. How did he punish them? He opened the temple courts to merchants who would be in direct competition with those in the market place.

The punishment even went a bit further, when it is learned that, often when a person bought a lamb at the market for sacrifice, when it was brought to the temple it was conveniently declared by Caiaphas' men to be unfit. Thus, the worshipper was forced to buy another animal from the temple market, even though there was likely nothing wrong with the first animal. Sometimes the temple officials offered to buy the first animal at a discount, and then resell it to the next poor soul.

If Epstein is correct in his hypothesis, it helps to explain with even more weight, the anger Jesus demonstrates in this passage. In the tradition of the great prophets before him, and certainly John wants us to see this connection, Jesus demonstrates outrage at the profanity going on in the temple.

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Now I need to explain something about what the true nature of profanity is. Usually we think of profanity as nasty words, sometimes called foul words, or swear words. The actual definition though is a bit broader, and a lot more serious.

To profane something, is to treat something known to be sacred with irreverence, disrespect, or to desecrate or blaspheme something sacred. The thing that is sacred could be a religious book, a special sacred place, or even the ideas of a religion. Profanity is the act of this irreverence, or an utterance that is profane. It isn't about four-letter words but about respect. Caiaphas' revenge on the merchants of Kidron, led to a profaning of the sacred place.

Like all major prophets before him, Jesus joins a centuries old chorus of protest against the desecration, or profaning of God's house. This act of Jesus is one more sign of him being the Messiah, as the Messiah was to purify God's people. So, we have in Matthew 16:14, Jesus being linked to Jeremiah the prophet when he calls the temple courts a "den of thieves" (Jer. 7:11). In Zechariah 14:21 "The Day of the Lord" namely the coming of the Messiah would be marked by the removal of any impurities.

Jesus is also linked to Malachi 3:1 in its chastisement of the abuses of worship, and Isaiah 56:7 where God calls for a perfect house of prayer. John also quotes directly Psalm 69:9, "Passion for God's house burns within me." Jesus is taking on the role of prophet, by calling the people to account for their profaning of God's house, but also the role of Messiah by actually cleaning the house of worship.

But again, I ask the question; what led to the abuses and to the profaning of God's house? Was it not playing politics? Was it not the manipulation of the situation for personal gain? Of course, it was. And that's the issue for us. Whenever we take the easiest course, or cut corners, or do what makes us popular, or grants us more power; at the expense of principle, or respect for the sacred, then we are being profane.

The sad thing is, the more we allow the profane to invade the sacred in our lives, the more difficult it becomes to see the sacred. In other words, we become blind to the presence and work of God. Herbert Tarr, author of *For Heaven's Sake*, received a letter from a Long Islander stating that her church was in a hopeless mess. "We've tried bingo games, box socials, benefit movie openings-everything," she complained.

"Can't you suggest something, no matter how drastic, to keep our church afloat?" Mr. Tarr answered, "Try religion." Jesus' passion in the temple, was most certainly motivated by the profanity of those individuals exploiting worshipers, and how it had become a distraction from the main purpose of this sacred space; namely prayer. Anyone coming to worship would have to run a gauntlet of: merchants, money changers, and religious police: before you could even get near the inner court to pray.

And like the prophets before him, Jesus is chastised by the religious leaders. "What right (authority) do you have to do these things? If you have this authority from God, show us a miraculous sign to prove it."

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If you are going to accuse us of profaning the Lord's house, then prove to us you have God's stamp of approval to do so. Do a miracle Jesus, and we shall believe you. Prove yourself Jesus. Remember what I said about profanity?

Profanity is showing disrespect to the sacred, and the religious leaders were hardly respectful of Jesus. Their level of profanity hits a new high as they challenge and conspire against Jesus who is the Messiah. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The religious leaders were outraged. Ironically, they believe Jesus was being profane. How dare he, suggest that this great monument to God's glory, should be destroyed after it took forty-six years to build?

As we know now, Jesus was talking about himself, and his crucifixion. He was the temple of God, and the ultimate act of profanity was crucifying him. Jesus' point is clear. The sacred is not found in bricks and mortar, nor ultimately books, art or music; although we can see sacred elements in these things. No, the truly sacred that we are in danger of profaning is found in Jesus.

And even though the religious leaders were very open in their acts of profanity towards Jesus, we are no less immune to such trespasses. We show profanity when we ignore Christ's call to love others. "They will know you are my disciples if you love one another". It is profanity not to give generously to those in need, and to not tell others about Jesus. We show profanity when we profess faith, and yet demonstrate with our lives anything but a faithful following of Jesus.

We show profanity when we fight tooth and nail to avoid commercial activity in a sacred place, but erect barriers that keep people who need Christ away. We demonstrate profanity when we place before the ever-watching world, ambassadors of Christ who are anything but representative of the Lord they claim to serve. The real scandal in the church isn't represented by the Jim Bakkers whose indiscretions are brought to light.

The real scandal in the church is the: disrespect, irreverence, and hypocrisy that lurk among God's people. These words seem harsh, maybe even in your mind uncalled for, and I don't wish to bring us down. I am seeking to be cautionary. I am seeking to commend us all to vigilance. I am calling us to be concerned not so much with temporal matters like who spilled coffee on the floor, or who broke a window of the church building, but rather to be concerned about how we represent Christ.

Perhaps we think the warning unnecessary. That is until we read a bit further in our passage, and read Jesus' own opinion of people. John writes that Jesus performed miraculous signs, and many people believed he was the Messiah because of the miracles. Then John writes, "But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." (Jn. 2:24-25)

Just a friendly reminder that we are not immune to these dangers.

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It is so easy to get caught up in issues and circumstances that distract or harm the sacredness that Christ is attempting to foster in us and through us. There is no room for compromise in the principles set forth by Christ to his followers. But the issue now becomes the fact that the temple in which God dwells is you and I.

And sometimes it is you and I who need Christ to go through and drive out the clutter. It may not be a pleasant experience, and we may even want to protest to Jesus, “Who are you to do such a thing? By what authority do you drive out the profanity from our hearts and lives?” But just because it is difficult, or messy, or challenging for Christ to cleanse our temples, doesn’t mean the end goal isn’t worth achieving. It reminds me of a story the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov like to tell about his uncle Joe.

These are Asimov’s words,

My uncle Joe was sitting at my dining room table, his head in his hands, looking haggard and dejected. “Uncle Joe,” I said, “you look terrible. What’s the matter?” Uncle Joe barely lifted his head as he answered, “Isaac, I’m tired of being a social outcast. I’m with the circus, you see, and clean up the animal cages. The result is that I can’t help smelling a little. Naturally, people avoid me, and I don’t like it.”

“Well,” I said, I know what you mean, and I have to tell you that it’s not the best fragrance in the world. But look here; there are openings down in the plywood mill in town. You could get a job there, and it would even pay more than your circus position.” “What!” said Uncle Joe, outraged? “And leave show business?”

Sometimes being a faithful follower of Jesus makes us socially unwanted. To compensate we endeavor to be prominent just so we would fit in, even if doing so means profaning the sacred within us. But the cost is high, because of what we would leave behind, or smother within. Lent is a wonderful time of year to do some spring cleaning of our hearts, and lives.

To get rid of the clutter that stifles the work of God in us. Christ is inviting us to undertake such a task with his help, because after all he knows what people are like.