

**+ John 2:13-22 + Christ Cares for His Church + 3rd Sunday in Lent + 15 March 2009 +**

The springtime was just beginning. The weather wasn't much different than it is here and now. Sun shining. Snows finally giving way to new plants just starting to break through. There was still a little chill in the air especially in the evening and early morning, but spring was finally on its way.

The coming of spring also meant the celebration of the Passover—the annual commemoration of how God delivered his people, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt. All Jewish males 12 years old and older customarily made the annual pilgrimage up to Jerusalem with their families. People traveled from every corner of the known world to celebrate this highest festival day of the Jewish church year in the holy city of Jerusalem, the home of God's holy temple, the very heart of Jewish worship life. There hundreds of animals—bulls, heifers, sheep, goats, and doves—were sacrificed to the Lord for sin, guilt, and thanksgiving to fulfill God's holy Law.

It was for this Passover celebration that Jesus and his disciples with hundreds of other Old Testament believers made their way up to the city of Jerusalem and to the temple. It was early in the first year of Jesus' public ministry. He had already called his disciples, had begun to preach, and even performed a couple of well-known miracles. There were already whispers that he might be the Messiah.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples entered the temple and were immediately assaulted with a shockwave of noise and odor. The courtyards were packed as countless pilgrims haggled with greedy vendors over the cost of a heifer, a bull, a lamb or two doves. Coins jingled as vendors pitched "the best price in Jerusalem for a Passover lamb!" and "Two doves for the price of one today only!" Money changers offered "discount" exchange rates for foreign pilgrims who needed to pay the temple tax with a particular Jewish coin. To make the scene even more unbearable, a mixture of body odor and manure filled the air of the temple.

Now it was true that these vendors provided an important service for the pilgrims, but Jesus and his disciples had rightly expected to find a sanctuary. They expected find a place that symbolized God's presence among his people, a place where the true God was worshiped with prayer and solemn sacrifice. Instead they found a noisy, smelly, filthy marketplace devoted to the worship of greed.

The temple and all those sacrifices were meant to foreshadow, to mirror what Jesus himself had come to be—God's dwelling place on earth in the flesh, the sinless Lamb of God sent to be sacrificed for the sins of all. Greed had turned the temple and its sacrifices into a market filled with sales. The true purpose of the temple and its sacrifices was nearly forgotten. Christ cared too much to do nothing, however, so consumed with holy zeal he prepared to take a stand against what had happened to his Father's house. Taking leather cords, Jesus made a makeshift whip and he **"drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle..."**

Jesus was unstoppable. Animals and people scurried in every direction as he cleared them from every corner. With crash after crash, **"he scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables."** Cages broke open as doves flapped all over the courtyard. Livestock cried out as the whip came down on their backsides to clear them out of the temple. Vendors and money changers yelled in anger as their profits literally disappeared. The deafening din of the market was replaced with the angry voice of the offended Jesus, who declared, **"Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"**

So what did Jesus' disciples think about all this? Did they think Jesus was delusional? Did they fear his temper? They were frightened. They were awestruck as they watched Jesus clear out the temple courtyards. In the midst of all that, they recalled King David's words from Psalm 69, **"Zeal for your house will consume me."** King David had written those words looking ahead to the coming of the Messiah—God's Anointed One. Now the disciples applied those same words to Jesus as they realized further that Jesus was God's Anointed come to save sinful mankind. They recalled how serious God really is about his Church and its worship life. They realized that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God.

When we hear those striking words of Jesus that seem so uncharacteristic of him, they might leave us confused until we understand why he did what he did. Why did Jesus get so offended? Why did he seem so violent? Why cleanse the temple with such deliberate action? **Christ cares about his church.** In fact, he cares so much that his zeal for it consumes him. He cared about what was going on within the temple. He cared about what that meant for those who trusted in him. So many thought they had license to do whatever they wanted since they had the temple and its sacrifices. Their actions distracted God's people from the true purpose of the temple and its sacrifices, all of which pointed to Jesus their Savior.

We dare not think that Jesus' zeal for his Church has dimmed or faded any in the last 2000 years. Christ is as serious about his Church and his Gospel today as he was back then. Just because we have a congregation

and the Gospel, just because we have opportunities to worship and study the Word doesn't mean we ought to take them lightly, to think they're optional, to think we'll always have them, or worse yet, to use the fact that we have them on Sundays to serve as a license to sin during the week.

Christ is so zealous for his Church and cares so much for it, because through the Gospel proclaimed there, he and his forgiveness are revealed to us. Jesus doesn't want anything to detract from that good news of sins forgiven going out into the world. Jesus doesn't want anything to detract from our worship of the true God in spirit and in truth. He doesn't want anything to detract from our hearing and sharing that Gospel message. If anything hinders his Church from carrying out its purpose, then Christ has to drive that out. If anything hinders his Gospel from being the focus of our worship lives or if anything hinders us from hearing that Gospel in all its fullness, then Christ has to cleanse us like he cleansed his temple. Christ cares about his Church, and therefore, cares about us. He wants us in heaven enjoying the salvation he won for us. He cares so much about us that he even proclaims the hard words we may not want to hear, but need to hear. He accomplishes what needs to be done to keep us focused on him and his salvation, even willingly being rejected and enduring suffering and death for us!

That all-consuming love Christ has for us did eventually lead to his rejection, suffering, and death. This early in his ministry, Jesus hadn't made any enemies yet, but that was quickly changing. ***"The Jews demanded of him, 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?'"*** The religious leaders could've had Jesus arrested, but instead they questioned him. In the process they missed the point. Instead of addressing the faults Jesus exposed in the temple practices, they demanded that he perform a miracle to prove his authority for cleansing the temple.

Jesus offered one, ***"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days."*** The Jewish leaders snickered, ***"It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"*** Unfortunately, they missed the point again. Jesus was referring to his body and comparing it to the temple. A time was going to come just three years later, when that temple of his body would be destroyed in death on a cross, but three days later, that same temple of his body would be raised to life.

The unbelief of the Jewish leaders was already becoming evident, and no matter what sign Jesus promised, they would reject him. His promise of a sign eventually became a sign of judgment against them. They had the promise and rejected it, but not everyone listening that day rejected him.

In fact, Jesus' disciples, who had observed the entire temple cleansing, were listening. John recounts for us how they reacted to Jesus' statement. ***"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken."*** Their reaction to what Christ had to say was that of growing trust. Their faith was growing and would continue to do so as they followed Jesus, as they listened to his teaching, as they witnessed his miracles, as they observed his suffering and death, as they witnessed the risen Savior in the flesh. Jesus would make good on his promise for their benefit and ours.

Oh, how much **Christ cares for his Church!** Jesus, who had proven he was true God in the cleansing of the temple, was willing to be destroyed for us, his Church. Jesus, who had defended his Father's house as God's Son, was willing to endure death and be raised again three days later on Easter Sunday. Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, now is willing to use simple tools—the written and spoken Word, a little bread and wine in his Supper, a little water in Baptism—to pour out all his blessings of grace to us.

See the Savior's care for us in his striking words and actions! See his love! See his zeal for our spiritual and heavenly well-being! See the zealous love and care the Savior displays even now as he is revealed to the world through his Gospel, as he makes our hearts his dwelling-place through faith in him! So great is that wondrous love that Christ has for us that we can do nothing, but marvel in awe at the Son of God. May we like those disciples recall that wondrous, awesome love displayed in Christ's actions. May we believe the Scripture and the words Jesus has spoken! May we gladly hear and learn them, and may they be for us a lifeline to Christ's love until he brings us to the eternal sanctuary of heaven. Amen.