

### Lent 3B (3/15/09 – *Zeal for the Lord’s House Consumes Christ*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Our *Holy Gospel Lesson* for this *Third Sunday in Lent* [JN 2.13-25] gives us a rather uncommon picture of our Lord Jesus Christ – one that seems to be quite out of character. Our bulletin graphic catches it well – the furrowed forehead and eyebrows ... the snarl in the nose ... the glare in the eyes ... arm fully stretched back with the whip of cords in His hand ... ready to strike with full force to drive out the sellers and moneychangers from the Temple courtyard. Christ is angry! ... seething with righteous wrath against those who were making His *Father’s house a house of trade* [2.16]!

We’ve heard this – or a similar text – before. This particular event appears to be early in our Lord’s public ministry – the first Passover after He was baptized by John and began preaching repentance of sins and faith in the Gospel ... that is, faith in Him ... and the work He came to do ... the salvation plan He came to fulfill. And when we think about it, it seems the only time Jesus becomes truly angry is when this sort of thing is going on in the Temple. *Why would that be?* – is the question we might ask ourselves. For one thing Jesus would have been upset about this activity because there was probably corruption going on with it ... price-gouging ... unfair exchange rates ... inferior animals for sacrifice. But much more than that – as I have said before – the Temple courtyard was also supposed to be a place to hear the Word of God – it was the **only** place Gentiles could be in proximity to the Temple ... the only place they would be able to hear the Old Testament promises of the Messiah ... the place for them to hear the Word of the Gospel by which the Holy Spirit would work to create and sustain faith. That was made impossible by this noisy activity.

In short – the Gospel was at stake! That’s why Christ becomes so incensed on more than one occasion because of this activity going on in the Temple court. To be clear – I **am** making a particular interpretive move when I refer to the courtyard. From what we can tell from the Gospels, these moneychangers and animal traders would **not** have been in the Temple **proper** – the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. When St. John – and the other Evangelists – says *in the temple* by divine inspiration, he (by the Holy Spirit) is naming the whole complex by its most important item. It would be perhaps like our saying there is a Church Workday – and including in that work not only cleaning and repair of the church building proper but also the mowing the lawn, trimming the bushes, tending the flowers beds, etc.

But to get back to the main point of our Gospel text – just think of the chaos Christ created! Sheep and oxen were running around – perhaps birds flying ...

having escaped from their cages. There were coins all over ... tables turned over – how could anyone know what was whose? Jesus no doubt made quite an impression – and in general not a good one, judging from the leaders of the people who came to question Him.

Ah ... but before we get to their question, and Jesus' response – let's linger awhile on the words of verse 17: *His disciples remembered that it was written: "Zeal for Your house will consume Me."* It comes from PSALM 69 – I read verses 7–9: *For it is for Your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered My face. I have become a stranger to My brothers, an alien to My mother's sons. For zeal for Your house has consumed Me, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on Me.* If we understand these words as referring to Christ above all – as our Gospel bids us to interpret them – we have quite a prophecy concerning Christ being fulfilled in our text. It is precisely because of His zeal for the Father's house – for the things of God ... the right teaching of God ... the right sacrificing to God ... the right worship of God ... the Gospel of God – that Christ receives the reproaches of the Jewish leaders ... and the world in general. And in His zeal, He reveals some things not only about Himself ... but also about them ... **and us.**

Namely, when we take offense at those who are zealous for the things of the Lord ... for the Lord's house – like the Jews did in our text – it is often because that zeal reveals **our LACK of zeal.** If we cannot somehow deride those who are so zealous – as the Jews tried to do to Jesus – then we have to face the reality that we do **not**, perhaps, *fear, love, and trust in God above all things* ... like we have learned in conjunction with the First and **all** the Commandments. It is, in the end, our lack of right fear and trust in God that is at the root of **all** our sins – whether they be sins against our neighbor by thought or word or deed ... or sins against God more directly.

It is our lack of zeal that causes us to forget to thank God for His daily benefits ... morning, noon, and night. It is our lack of zeal that causes us to skip daily hearing or reading of His Word ... daily meditation on that Word ... and daily prayer for the Church, the world, our neighbors, and ourselves. It is our lack of zeal that allows us to become distracted during the Divine Service ... to let our minds drift into thoughts of our miserable, mundane tasks ... to become bored with hearing the Scriptures and their teaching in sermon and Bible Study ... to neglect the opportunities afforded us to hear fine, faithful preaching both on Sundays and at our Lenten Midweek Vespers – or to attend these in body but not in mind and spirit.

Our Savior's zeal for His Father's house does – in a sense – serve to highlight

our own **sinful lack** of zeal. And, therefore, even as Jesus is zealous for the sake of the Gospel, we find ourselves condemned by the Law. And Jesus knew that there would be two sides to this “coin” – if you will. He knew that His zeal would also prove to be a sign that speaks against us ... against our sin of lacking zeal – a sign that would be spoken against. For, as our text goes says in the last verse: ***He Himself knew what was in man*** [2.25] – namely, sin and sinfulness ... through and through.

But Jesus’ zeal **IS** for the sake of the Gospel. And the words of St. John speak to more than just what Jesus did in the Temple’s court of the Gentiles that day. As the question – the hostile, reproachful question – of the Jews and our Savior’s response direct us to consider. ***What sign do You show us for doing these things?*** [2.18], the Jews ask. Or, to put it another way: *Who do You think You are? And what sign do You give us to prove to us that You are not a madman? Where is Your authorization to do these things? Show us!* ***Jesus answered them, “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and will You raise it up in three days?”*** [2.19-20] Then John adds the inspired commentary: ***But He*** [Jesus] ***was speaking about the Temple of His Body.*** [2.21] And, actually, the Jews understood this – that’s why they went to Pilate after Jesus’ crucifixion and burial and asked for the seal and guards to make sure no one stole Jesus’ Body. The only sign Jesus gave them was His death and resurrection – the destruction of the Temple of His Flesh by the shedding of His perfect, holy, innocent blood on the Cross ... and then His resurrection on the third day.

And, indeed, **that** zeal of the Son for the Father’s House completely eclipses the zealous rampage of whipping and driving out those who were sold and exchanged money in the Temple courtyard. It is precisely **there** – in the suffering, death, and crucifixion of our Lord – that we see the perfect fulfillment of the words of the Psalm [69.9-10].

***For it is for Your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered My face. I have become a stranger to My brothers, an alien to My mother’s sons. For zeal for Your house has consumed Me, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on Me.***

There – on the Cross – ***Zeal for the Lord’s House Consumes Christ*** ... quite literally ... **for us and for our eternal salvation!**

It is the Father’s **Own** zeal for His house – the house of His believers ... the Church – that compelled Him to send His Only-begotten Son into the Flesh. It is the Son’s zeal for His Father’s house – you and me and all who would be called by the Gospel – that compelled the Son to go forth in His fleshly Temple ... and allow

Himself to be consumed on the Altar of the Cross as the spotless, sacrificial Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. This seems like foolishness to those who think themselves wise ... it is an offense and stumbling block to Jews and all who consider the Cross to be a sign of weakness, utter despair, hopelessness, and failure (as our *Epistle* points out) – ***but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*** [1COR 1.18]. For by His Cross – and resurrection – ***Christ Jesus*** has become ***to us wisdom from God*** – indeed ***righteousness and sanctification and redemption*** [1.30].

And ***Zeal for the Lord's House Consumes Christ*** still. Not as before ... but still His whole desire is for the sake of the Father's household of faith. That's why He gives us so much of His Gospel – in the Word and the Sacraments. That's why He continues to give us Himself – that we might consume Him and receive all the blessed benefits of His zeal for the Lord's house. The zeal of Christ revealed in our *Holy Gospel Lesson* is but a foretaste of His greater zeal to redeem the whole world ... the promise is for you and your children ... for all who hear the Gospel of Christ's zeal displayed for all to see on the Cross.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the + SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]