

3rd Sunday of Lent

For Jews the Temple in Jerusalem was, and its site still is, the holiest place on earth – the place where the glory of God had made its throne the Ark of the Covenant placed within the Holy of Holies. Since they do not recognise Jesus as the Messiah they expect him, when he comes, to rebuild the Temple. For Moslems too it is a holy place – after Mecca and Medina. They call it ‘Haram’ – a word that means both ‘sacred’ and ‘forbidden’. For the pagan Romans there was a thin dividing line between the holy and the cursed – both were left in the hands of the gods, those condemned to death as well as sacrifices offered to the gods. The whole concept of a temple in the ancient world was completely different to the Christian understanding of a church. The holy place was reserved for God or the gods – only priests were allowed inside. People did not attend for services but to make offerings. There might be processions but these would be outside.

The Temple with which Our Lord was familiar was still under construction and would not be finished for another twenty years. The outer courtyard was a vast open area surrounded by a shopping arcade. Unlike the rest of the Temple it was open to non-Jews. People could change their currency for special coins without any pagan images to pay the Temple tax, or buy animals for sacrifice. The inner area was surrounded by a low wall and palisade with warnings that non-Jews who went through would be subject to the death penalty. After going through the gates, you would pass through an area open to women to a courtyard for men only. Beyond this was another open courtyard surrounding the Temple proper. Only priests and Levites were allowed here and people would hand their sacrifices over to be offered. In front of the Temple was an open-air altar. Only the duty priest was allowed into the Temple to offer the twice-daily sacrifice of incense. Beyond this lay the Holy of Holies. The High Priest entered this just once a year on the Day of Atonement.

For Our Lord the Temple is not only a holy place, but his Father’s house. He comes to the Temple and interferes, driving out the shopkeepers and commercial elements. Jesus by this gesture was asserting his role as the Messiah, the anointed King, the only person with a right to do this. The temple and its well-ordered worship will come to a permanent end just forty years later in 70 A.D. It will already be redundant. Jesus will himself be the Temple. His sacrifice on the cross will replace the system of animal sacrifices. Jesus will be the High Priest offering worship on our behalf, and we will be able to share in that worship through prayer, and by uniting ourselves to him through our participation in the Mass.

Holiness is not just something external – the setting apart of a sacred place. Our Lord comes to teach us a way of personal holiness by loving God and our neighbour. The Ten Commandments offer a focussed way of putting this into practice. Love of God comes first. The first tablet contains three commandments. We must not put anyone or anything else on a level with God, or give them priority over God – that is to make an idol of them! We must show personal respect for God in the way in which we use his name. We must keep holy the day he has set aside in his honour, not only by giving him time in prayer and worship, but also enjoying the opportunity for rest and recreation. It is a day for God, family and friends, not for work that can be done on other days. The second tablet contains the seven commandments that express our love for neighbour – God looking at us through the eyes of our brothers and sisters. We must honour and respect our parents. We must not kill, or treat our spouse unjustly by being unfaithful. We must not steal, or bear false witness or cast envious glances at what God has given another person. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites us to see these as the minimum. He wants us to go beyond ticking the box to show generosity of heart by foregoing our rights when someone insults or steals from us, lending without expecting to be paid back, loving our enemies. In doing these things we show love for God as well as other people. Whether we realise it or not we are acknowledging that God is present everywhere, looking at us through the eyes of other people, not just in a special place cut off from the real world.

Lent is a time when we invite the Lord to sweep us clean and help us grow in holiness.