

**Lenten Luncheon Reflections**  
**Tuesday, February 19, 2008**  
**Jesus “Cleanses” the Temple in Jerusalem**

Opening Hymn: “Sweet Hour of Prayer” (Stanzas 1 and 2)

Prayer:

As we turn to you in prayer, O God, we would thank you for the privilege which you have given to us to come to you in prayer, not just to bring our requests and our thanksgiving to you, but also to listen for what you would have to say to us. For all of the ways in which you have enabled us to grow deeper in our relationship with you as we have taken advantage of this privilege of prayer, we give you praise and thanks as we thank you also for the gracious provisions of your bounty that we have shared together around these tables this day, and for all who have prepared them for us, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

After last week’s presentation I was asked where in the Bible someone may learn more about the procession of Pontius Pilate into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. I had to assure the person that that story is not in the Bible. Stories of such processions are found in Roman and Jewish history. These resources and others are used to try to give a broader picture to the events that are described in the Bible.

This morning I would like to ask you quietly to think about two questions. Don’t worry, they are not hard and there is not going to be a test at the end. The first question is, “When someone mentions the word, ‘church’ what comes to your mind?” The second question is, “When you think about what comes to your mind

when you hear the word church what makes this significant and special in your life?"

I would like to invite you to keep those questions churning in your minds as you try to picture what Mark records as the second day of Holy Week. In Mark's Gospel in so many ways the first day ends in something of an anti-climax. Jesus has had what we frequently term his triumphal entry into the capital city of Jerusalem. The crowds have cheered him on but then Mark says, "he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." For many who had cheered him on and who had looked for him to bring in the kingdom of his ancestor David the whole thing must have seemed like a damp squib. What looks like such an explosive situation for change peters out as Jesus instead of launching some great revolution leaves the city for a night of rest in Bethany.

Like so many other aspects of the Gospel lessons how much we wish that Mark would have told us what Jesus and the twelve disciples talked about as they made that journey back to Bethany that night. He also, of course, fails to tell us whether anyone was thoughtful enough to return the donkey on which Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem to its owner as Jesus had promised.

We are left only to conjecture what was running through the minds and the conversations of Jesus and the disciples as they journeyed that night back to

Bethany. Mark does tell us, though, what happened the next day when he says,

(Mark 11:12-14) On the following day, when they came from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. [13] Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. [14] He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Maybe Martha in whose home in Bethany Jesus and the disciples may have stayed had gotten tired of taking care of all the matters in the kitchen for preparing meals for Jesus and his disciples so they have to leave Bethany without breakfast. Whatever it was that caused his hunger we have this strange story in which Jesus curses the fig tree because when he looked for figs he was disappointed because it only had leaves. The action of Jesus seems a little harsh especially when Mark adds that it was not even the season to expect figs. The story is one to which we will return as we note part of Mark's literary technique of starting one story, interrupting it with another, and then ending the first story and allowing the story in the middle to help people to understand and to interpret the first story.

The middle story for Mark in this instance is probably the more familiar of the two stories. Even this story, though, is somewhat embarrassing and difficult to understand so that it is not one of the stories of Jesus that gets pictured, or even read so often. Mark says, (Mark 11:15-17)

Then Jesus and the disciples came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; [16] and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. [17] He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

The temple area that Jesus entered covered some 35 acres in the center of the city of Jerusalem. The most popular of all their kings, David, gathered the materials for his son Solomon to build, about 950 B.C., the first temple on that holy site, Mount Moriah, where Abraham had offered to sacrifice his son Isaac, The temple had always symbolized for the people the presence of their most holy

God, Yahweh. This temple was burned to the ground by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. The Temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel in 516 B.C. It was desecrated and stripped by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C., and cleansed and restored by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C. The temple in which Jesus found himself was marked by the remodeling work and expansion begun by Herod the Great in 20 B.C. This work was not yet completed while Jesus was there and was not finished until 68 A.D. In his “remodeling” of the modest postexilic temple Herod had really built a new temple surrounded by spacious courts and elegant colonnades, with sumptuous use of marble and gold. Even non-Jewish writers described the temple complex as the most magnificent in the Roman Empire. This Herodian Temple was extremely lavish and more beautiful than the Temple of Solomon. Those of you who have been to Jerusalem or who have seen pictures know that all that remains now of what Jesus knew as the Temple is the western wall, often called the wailing wall, where devout Jews still go to pray and to place prayer requests in between the stones. This is how the temple has been since the Romans shattered a great revolt by re-conquering the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. The destruction of the temple changed Judaism forever. Sacrifice, which had been such a central portion of the life of the temple, ceased, the role of the priesthood was eclipsed, and the central institutions of the religion became scripture, especially the Torah, and the synagogue. We remember that even Mark’s Gospel, which most scholars suggest was the first Gospel to be written, was being written as this revolt and the destruction of the Temple was taking place, or at least, soon afterwards.

When we look at the picture of Herod’s temple, the temple into which Jesus and his disciples entered, we see that the largest section is the Court of the Gentiles. This is where the selling of animals for sacrifice and the exchanging of money to pay the temple tax would have taken place. This was the only place

where people of all nations could come and pray in the temple. The other courts were restricted to Women, to men in the Court of Israel, and then the Court of the Priests. Between the court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women were displayed on the stones words of severe warning to any non-Jew who might try to enter. Placed at strategic points and written in Latin and Greek were the words, “No Foreigner is to go beyond the balustrade and the plaza of the temple zone. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.” With words like these clearly visible the temple as it was operating when Jesus was there it was clearly not a place that welcomed all nations to come to pray. In fact the only place they were welcome was precisely where all of the sale of the animals for sacrifice and the moneychangers were at work. In driving out those who were selling and buying the temple and overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, Jesus in effect was closing down what the people of his day would have seen as the essential things for the Temple to continue to operate. Jesus does not destroy the temple but by his action he symbolically at least brings the operation of the temple to a halt. In this way his action anticipates the destruction of the temple just about 40 years later.

Even though his actions were symbolic it is clear that those whose lives were closely related to the work of the temple, many of whom no doubt profited from the business that went on there, saw his actions as a threat and a challenge to what they were doing that we read, (Mark 11:18) “And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.” Earlier back in Galilee so much of his conflict had been with the Pharisees, but now conflict begins between Jesus and the chief priests and the scribes. This is the conflict that is to lead just a few days later to his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

For now, though, he has the support of the people and those who feel threatened by him are afraid to touch him. So we read, “And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.” (Mark 11:19)

After another night presumably in Bethany we read (Mark 11:20-21) “In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”

This brings us back to the earlier morning and concludes the story started there which is interrupted by the cleansing of the temple. When we look at the stories together we see that the cursing of the fig tree is also seen as a symbolic reminder of what is going to happen to the temple. The fig tree was actively putting out leaves and gave the impression of having something prepared for Jesus to eat, but bears no fruit. The temple is full of activity but it is like the fig tree failing to bear the fruit that God desires of providing a place where the people of all nations may come to pray and to know what it is to enter into a personal relationship with God.

Taken together the stories stand as a warning that any activity, however good, proper, even legal it might be, without the fruit God desires from it can be of no avail, and in God’s eyes should be shut down.

The two stories taken together prompt us to look at our own personal lives as the followers of Jesus, and also at the life of the church, and to ask whether we are busy putting out a lot of leaves, making a big show of things, but are failing to bear the fruit of prayer and of a living relationship with God ourselves that will prompt other people to want to share in such a relationship with God themselves.

I would like to ask you to think again about those two questions that I invited you to keep churning over in your minds as I spoke. First of all, “What

came to your mind when you heard the word, “church?” Then secondly what made that significant and special in your life?

I do not know how you may have answered those questions, but as I think about the word church I think not just of buildings but of people through whose words and actions I have come to know Jesus Christ and to know what it is to pray and to enter into a relationship with him through prayer. What makes the church significant or special in my life is that I know that if you take away all that I have come to know through the church of what a relationship with Jesus Christ means I would have very little knowledge of him or of what it means to be his follower today.

Joseph Scriven has reminded us that prayer and that personal relationship with God which comes through prayer is a privilege which God has given us as we know what it is to have a friend in Jesus. Let us sing again of that privilege using his hymn as found in the booklet. We will sing stanzas 1 and 2.

Closing Hymn: “What A Friend We Have in Jesus” (stanzas 1 and 2)

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for all that you have done for us in Jesus Christ that enables us to know the privilege of coming to you in prayer with all of our concerns, our needs and our anxieties. For all of the ways in which our relationship with you has been deepened and enhanced through the privilege of prayer, and for all the peace that you have brought to our lives through such a relationship we give you praise and thanks in the name of Jesus. Amen.

*Much of the material for this presentation was drawn from the book, “The Last Week,” by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins, 2006.*