

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR B

When we come into the Cathedral for Mass we pass through the foyer/entrance area. It's proper name is the vestibule or the narthex. In the winter our narthex serves the practical purpose of helping to keep out the wind and the cold. It's also where we pause for a moment before entering into the Church proper for Mass. It's where we collect our bulletins and leaflets; have the opportunity to buy religious articles or literature; greet one another; quieten down the kids; neaten and adjust our hair and clothing; collect our thoughts, bless ourselves with Holy Water, then enter for worship.

It's actually quite an important part of our Cathedral and of all churches. The narthex is the gateway through which we pass as we move from the world outside - our worlds of work, business, chores, and hobbies – into the sacred space of our churches where we offer our worship, our prayers, our sacrifice, and our thanksgiving to the Living God. It is intended to help prepare us for true worship. And so we endeavour to keep them quiet and respectful places.

The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was an enormous and beautiful structure that would dwarf our Cathedral. Instead of a small narthex it had a huge courtyard where the people could prepare for their temple worship. And since a significant part of their worship of God consisted in making him sacrificial offerings of bulls and sheep and pigeons, there were people in the temple courtyard selling these animals to the faithful who would then take them inside to the temple proper and give them to the priest to sacrifice on the altar. And since many of the faithful who came to worship God in the temple carried Roman or Greek currency in their purse, there were also money changers set up in the courtyard to provide worshippers with Jewish coins for making their temple offering.



What started out as legitimate help for people to offer sacrifice to God in the Temple eventually turned the Temple, the House of God, into a busy, noisy marketplace where people's behaviour was no different to anywhere else in the city. As Jesus arrived at the Temple on the day Saint John tells us about in the Gospel, such a busy scene would have seemed completely normal to all present including his disciples.

Imagine then how surprised they must have been to see Jesus become so suddenly 'unhinged'. Jesus, tender compassionate merciful loving Jesus, suddenly shouting at the top of his lungs, running at the booths, lashing out with a whip, up-ending furniture, scattering coins, sending cattle stampeding, birds flying, and worshippers and merchants running for cover.

What a violent reaction from Jesus; how can we explain it? We might start by looking at what Jesus says toward the end of our Gospel today: "Jesus knew them all ... he could tell what a man had in him." Arriving at the Temple that day Jesus saw more than the hustle and bustle of the place; he saw into the heart of every man woman and child there. He saw that the merchants were there, not to assist the worshippers, but to make a buck - and I'd guess a dishonest buck at inflated prices. And he saw that the worshippers were simply going

through the motions of their external rituals expecting to earn or buy God's favour. Whereas their worship and sacrifices were supposed to be the external expression of a deep love and gratitude to God.

God had already said many centuries before through the Prophet Isaiah "Your endless sacrifices, what do I care about them? I am fed up with your burnt offerings of rams and bulls" (1:11) Instead, the worship God asks for is this "wash and make yourselves clean. Remove your evil deeds from before my sight; put an end to your wickedness, seek justice, and learn to do good." (1:16-17)

Jesus' violent reaction to their poor hypocritical and shoddy worship also indicates that Jesus clearly sees the right worship of God as very very important. If it wasn't important he wouldn't have got upset. So its important that *we* get *our* worship right. In our churches we no longer offer animal sacrifices to God. Instead, in the Mass Jesus has replaced this with the offering to God the Father of his own body and blood which he gave for us on the cross and which was raised from the dead. And to Jesus' perfect sacrifice we add the offering of our own imperfect selves as we seek to give our thanks to the God who gives us all.

We don't have to be perfect to worship God well, but we do have to be honest and sincere. I do need to be trying to live by God's commandments, trying to be good and just, trying to love God and neighbour, and being honest and humble enough to ask God's forgiveness when I fail. And I should come to Mass with a grateful heart that wants to thank God, and with a child's heart ready to plead with God. And I pray at Mass in such a way that both my body and my soul together are praising and worshipping God.

We have only a small narthex in our Cathedral. But may our brief journey of just a few steps through the narthex each Sunday remind us of the need to prepare ourselves to worship God well. The love and worship of God is the first of the Ten Commandments which we heard in our First Reading. It's the first for a reason; for when we get that right we more easily get the rest right.

