

The Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2006

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19:7-14

Romans 7:13-25

John 2:13-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I received what I took to be a bit of a compliment the other day. A person commented on the neatness of my desk. I suppose it's true; there isn't much on the surface of the desk. There is a reason for that. Years ago I was stationed in Washington with an office on the Mall. In that assignment everything had to be off your desk at the end of the day. Security people swept the building at night and confiscated anything not put away securely. Better simply to not put stuff out in the first place – keep everything neat. That sort of thing becomes a habit that has stuck with me over the years. So the top of the desk is clear. Please do not open the desk drawers. Actually, you might not be able to open the desk drawers. Messy! It's paper, lots and lots of paper. What do you do with all that paper, some of which is important? For a society with computers and the Internet we still send an awful lot of paper around. We – or at least I – become overwhelmed by it all.

So, I was really pleased to see that I am not alone in being submerged by clutter. Perhaps you've had occasion to watch a channel called HGTV. It's sort of an oasis of practicality in the midst of "reality" programs and Bowflex ads. It's filled with home decoration and gardening programs – and there's one about organizing things.

ORGANIZING THINGS! There are people who actually make a profession of going around organizing peoples' homes – peoples' incredibly messy homes. The homeowners seem to be unable to deal with the mess – the mess they have made, I might add – so they need someone to come in and force them to make hard decisions about what is valuable and what should be thrown away. They are ruthless! They override all sorts of excuses and rationalizations and objections and all sorts of trash is hauled away. The mess is cleared up. The homeowners are organized and happy. What has really been organized? Their lives. For perhaps the first time they are making the right decisions about what's important. For the first time they can see what has value – and the organizer rides off into the sunset.

Now – lest you think there is no point to this sermon at all – I was reading this morning's Gospel and had a strange thought. Of course I have no doubt that it's a real story – a real event in Our Lord's life. I have no doubt that Jesus did encounter a mess in the courtyards of the temple and that He did react to it all with righteous anger and direct action. The Gospels agree on that. That's significant.

However, what if we read that story seeing that the Temple is us – our earthly lives? Remember that no one set out to build a temple with space reserved for moneychangers and pigeon sellers. When it was built, the Temple was clear and clean and totally dedicated to the worship of God. It was holy space.

Peoples' lives begin that way, I think. I think lives begin with good intentions. Small children do know right from wrong – justice from injustice – what's fair and what is not. They expect the world – they expect us – to live up to a pretty high standard of behavior. Life and the world have the potential for being clear and clean as that shiny new temple.

And then – little by little – the salesmen and the moneychangers move in and set up shop. There's a little distraction in this corner, a little compromise over there. There are a few temptations and little

white lies; a few big fat lies. There are a few tables full of greed, pride, anger, lust. It's all so subtle. It all happens so slowly that we never notice how full and how noisy our personal temple is becoming.

We never really meant it to be that way. We know how it's supposed to be. We can read Exodus. We know that those are Commandments, not suggestions or items for discussion with God. We find ourselves prisoners of a life we never intended, doing what we do not want to do because the temple is so crowded that we can no longer see a clear path.

Sometimes we delude ourselves that we can make it all right again; all we need is a little spiritual house cleaning. Of course, we can't! We need an organizer – a spiritual organizer. When the spiritual clutter and the mess reach the point that we are submerged, we need to call Him in. But, if we do call Him in – let Him into our little temple – watch out! Our most cherished shortcomings and compromises and sins are going out – just like the moneychangers and the pigeon salesmen.

What was left in the Temple – what is left in you and me – when Jesus is finished is a House of Worship, a place of prayer. What is left is God's Temple as He designed it to be – God's people as He intends us to be – stripped of all those things that have kept His people from being close to God, being one with God.

In His Holy Name.