

Lent III

March 15, 2009

You know, it always bothers me when Jesus gets out that whip. It seems so out of character. Jesus is supposed to be meek and mild and loving and accepting—then that whip shows up. At the time, it had great effect. The temple went crazy—there were tables and coins and pigeons and sheep and money changers and oxen and heaven only knows what else, running around all over the place. Suddenly there is this huge mess, and Jesus is in the middle of it, swinging that whip. It's troubling.

It can make you wonder what in the world God wants from us, anyway.

The place to start with all of this is the first reading, the one from Exodus with the ten commandments. This is the scene out of the movie. God has just delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the Red Sea and taken them to Mt. Sinai. God has saved the people, given them hope and direction, and promised them a wonderful homeland. It is only after all of this that God gives them the law. (Remember, the ten commandments are only a small part of the Law. The Law has lots and lots of rules and regulations; but these ten symbolize the whole thing.) So he gives them the law. That way, the people can make their love of God real by obedience to the law. The Law was a way for people to reach out to God, to love God back.

What God was after was relationship with his people. The Law, and the Temple it created, were to be a means toward this relationship with God. Think about it, when you love somebody, you delight in doing what they want. That was the idea with the law. The people love God, so they delight in obeying his commandments—not just, not even primarily, because the law is good for you (although it is)—but because this is what God asks us to do, and we want to love God back.

That was the idea behind the law. It's a good idea; in fact, it's a great idea. But it's also a very easy idea to mess up. It's easy to see the law, not as God intended it, (as a way to respond in love to God's goodness), but instead as the way we get to and stay in relationship with God. On that interpretation, it's up to us to get it right; to know the rules and to obey them, to hit the bull's eye every time—or we're in really big trouble. So the Law become a substitute for relationship; something you do for its own sake, something that take care of the religion business and leaves us free for other matters; something that can take the place of relationship.

In fact, this is the natural human tendency in dealing with religion. If there is any possible way we human beings can do it, we will screw it up; we will reduce our religion, no matter what it is, (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, whatever), we will reduce it to a set of rules—rules that we can follow, or not follow, rules we can use to judge ourselves and, more often, and more joyfully, other people. As a rule, we will just do that. Also, one of the constant themes of both the Old Testament and the New Testament is that we need to *stop* doing that.

This is where the whip of cords comes in. This is why Jesus made such a mess in the Temple, which was the place that the Law should have been most clearly lived out for Israel. Remember, in John's Gospel, the moneychangers aren't crooked, they aren't cheating or stealing. That's not the point. The money changers are just *there*. They are a central focus of the Temple, they are essential for fulfilling the Law.

And Jesus takes his whip and drives them out. When he drives them out, Jesus is really driving out the whole Temple. That's the truly radical part of this. It's not the messiness, it's Jesus' claims to replace the temple with the temple of his body.

With that whip and with that claim, Jesus makes it clear that *he* is to take the place of the temple and the law. From this time on, he, Jesus, is the center toward which all the faithful will pray, he is the locus of God's presence with the people, he is the visible assurance of God's love. From this time on, Jesus is the place where God and humanity will meet. Relationship with Jesus becomes the way we love God back. What the Temple signified, Jesus is. Anything that can become a substitute for this, anything that can grow to take the place of this, anything like that—well, all that gets the whip.

This is where Paul's stuff about the wisdom of the world and the stumbling block of the cross come in. All of the best ideas in the two religious traditions that Paul was dealing with—those of Israel and those of the larger Greek culture, all of those had their own ways into the divine, their own ways of setting up things that, while good ideas, even great ideas, to begin with, had turned into substitutes for loving God back, for relationship with God. There was the desire for miracles in Israel, and there was reason, and secret knowledge in the Greek world. All of that had become like the Temple, all of that had managed to get screwed up and to *get in the way*—to become substitutes for loving God back, for relationship with God. All of that, Paul says, all of that is replaced by Jesus, all of that gets the whip,

Instead, what replaces all of that is only Jesus, and by Jesus at his most unattractive and un-compelling moment—by the cross. Like the deliverance of Israel which it supercedes, it is the sacrifice of Jesus that is the defining moments of God's great love for humanity and relationship with Jesus is the means for reaching out to God, and for loving God back.

So, if we are to become who we want to be, if we are to deal with ourselves and with God, then the real issue is not rules, the real issue is not how good we are or whether or not we are willing to try harder. The real issue is not being smart or seeing exciting things. We need something else. We need to be transformed, we need to be changed, and we cannot do that on our own.

What God wants from us is relationship. God wants us to love him back. God will make that possible; and to do this we no longer go to the Law, or to the Temple.

To do this, we go to Jesus, and to the cross. We seek Jesus and the meaning of his cross. And we try to put to the side whatever things clutter and fill us, whatever stands between us and him. For there is really one thing God wants now. And, just to make that clear, everything else gets the whip.