

"Cleaning Up"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to clean up our lives as we reflect on Jesus cleaning up the Temple. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

Speedy Morris was the well-known, much loved and very successful coach of the basketball team at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. Speedy said that one day he was in the upstairs bathroom shaving when his wife told him he was wanted on the phone by Sports Illustrated. For the coach of a Division One basketball team that's a great honour, and Speedy said he was so excited that he accidentally cut himself with his razor. He grabbed some toilet paper and pressed it to his face and rushed out of the bathroom so he could get to the phone. Sports Illustrated calling could be the highlight of the year. So, with blood running down his cheek, he descended the stairs two at a time. He did fine for the first few stairs, but then lost his balance and literally rolled down the last half of the stairs. Speedy wasn't sure whether he had pulled or broken something, and limping awkwardly, he hurried the last few feet to the phone. "Sports Illustrated?" he asked. "Yes," came the reply, "and for only 75 cents an issue you can subscribe for an entire year."

It's tough to be let down: let down by Sports Illustrated; let down by politicians; let down by your friends; let down by people in general. Maybe we get our hopes up too high sometimes. In our gospel reading today, Jesus is let down by the religious leaders at the Temple in Jerusalem; let down by the crowds of people blindly following the traditional religious customs of their time; and Jesus tries to set it right.

Jerusalem is the geographic and spiritual centre of the Jewish faith and it had been that way for centuries before Jesus. There were many rules and traditions that governed the Jewish faith and there were several major festivals that encouraged the Jewish people to congregate, to celebrate, and to remember their history. Passover was one of the great pilgrimage festivals where huge crowds would congregate in Jerusalem. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus,

estimated that there were as many as 2.7 million pilgrims in Jerusalem at Passover. Passover commemorated Israel's liberation from Egypt: the slaughter of the Paschal lambs, the exodus, and God's mercy as they survived on manna in the wilderness.

One of the rituals at Passover was to offer sacrifices at the Temple. The Temple was the only place allowed for sacrifices and the animal or bird had to be perfect and unblemished to be acceptable, so people travelling from out of town usually had to buy their animals for sacrifice at the Temple. Once sacrificed, the animal usually became a part of the feast, to feed the family of the person making the sacrifice.

In addition, there was a Temple tax that had to be paid yearly at Passover. Greek and Roman coins were not allowed because they bore the image of the emperor. Consequently, foreign coins had to be exchanged for the legal currency of Jerusalem to pay the Temple tax. A well-established system developed for the exchange of coins, the payment of the tax and the purchase of animals for sacrifice and food.

In about 19 BC, King Herod began a massive restoration of the Jerusalem Temple and it was still ongoing 46 years later. Upon entering this still incomplete, but magnificent official place of worship, Jesus found little in the way of sacred space. It was more like an open-air market! There were cattle bellowing, sheep bleating, doves cooing, people haggling, coins clanging, and well, you can imagine the smells! During the pilgrimage festivals, the Temple was overrun by buyers and sellers engaged in commerce rather than worship. So, Jesus moves through the market with a whip creating holy havoc.

Jesus was an observant Jewish man who had gathered with the throngs of pilgrims in Jerusalem just prior to the Passover festival. Some commentators suggest that his clearing of the Temple is a demonstration of his humanity; his frustration showing; his anger in lashing out at the highly lucrative, captive markets of the animal sellers and money changers. But this would not have been Jesus' first pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival. Something was different this time.

There's a parable about a proud pond and a big old fish who lived in the pond. People would come from all around and exclaim how beautifully pure and clear the water was in this pond. Upon hearing so many positive proclamations, the pond's pride began to overflow its banks. "I must be the best, clearest and purest pond in the world," proclaimed the pond. The old fish at the bottom grew weary of the pond's pride. Better than anyone, the old fish knew what was really in the pond. So, resting on the bottom of the pond, the old fish began to flutter its fins. The motion of the water began to stir up the muck on the bottom of the pond and it didn't take long for the pond to fill up with a murky cloud. "Stop! What are you doing to me? How dare you dirty me up?" screamed the offended pond. The fish responded in measured and striking words: "I haven't done anything to you except to show you what has been in you all the time."

That's what Jesus was doing when he stirred up the Temple. In a measured and striking way that opened everyone's eyes to things they would not ordinarily be able to see, Jesus showed the people what had settled in the bottom of their hearts; how their worship rituals had become commercial and didn't glorify God.

The religious authorities at the Jerusalem Temple had the highest possible credentials, they had devoted their lives to the study of the Hebrew Bible. They were schooled in the scriptures and schooled in the applications of the Law to people's everyday lives. There were rules that governed almost everything, everything except, it would seem, for the wild commercial activity in the Temple at Passover. They should have known better, but somewhere along the way they had become distracted by growing the religious institution and fulfilling the growing requirements of their rituals.

After driving out the animals and the money changers, Jesus is asked for a sign of his authority to disrupt the established commercial operations of the Temple. Jesus responds, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Greek word for "raise" is the same word that's used to refer to resurrection. The reader knows about Jesus' resurrection, three days after dying on the cross. But the people at the time didn't yet realize that Jesus was talking about himself and they won't fully appreciate Jesus' message until after Easter.

The Temple was believed to be the focus of God's presence on earth and Jesus shifts the focus of God's presence to his own body. God's Temple on earth is Jesus' body. After Easter, the focus of God's presence will shift further, from Jesus' resurrected body to the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit working in us and among us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a famous Lutheran pastor and theologian who was Professor of Theology at the University of Berlin in the 1930's. At this time, German Christians were divided over Hitler. One group allied themselves with Hitler, calling themselves the "Reich Church." Bonhoeffer was among those who didn't agree with Hitler's radical, anti-Jewish vision. With others, he set up an underground church called the "Confessing Church." It was dangerous. In 1937, Bonhoeffer fled to London. Two years later Bonhoeffer was faced with a choice. He was offered one of the most prestigious theology appointments in the world, lecturing at Union Seminary in New York. Alternatively, he could return to Germany to head up an illegal, underground seminary for the churches who refused to go along with Hitler. He decides that his faith is meaningless if he takes the easy alternative and he heads back to Germany. He finds Hitler so evil that he abandons his commitment to non-violence and gets involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot fails and in April 1943, Bonhoeffer is arrested. In prison he leads worship services for his fellow prisoners, until April 9th, 1945 when he was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler, just a few days before the Flossenburg concentration camp he was in was liberated.

Bonhoeffer was distressed by the way so many Christians could follow Hitler's evil vision. How could Christians so betray Christ? Like Jesus cleaning up the Temple, Christianity needed cleaning up. Bonhoeffer was convinced that it didn't matter how fervently a person professed Jesus, how many times each day they prayed, how sincerely they sang on Sundays. In the end, the measure of our faith is not how we act in the church building, but how we live our lives. How we actively express the love of God within us, for we are the living church and God dwells in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.