

**Third Sunday of Lent – Year B  
(Mar. 19, 2006)**

***A Den of Thieves***

What do you do when people in legitimate authority are committing injustices or doing things that are hurting other people, especially if you have taken the normal means to try to correct such abuses but they have not succeeded? It's the situation facing people like so many antiwar and anti-nuclear protesters whose demonstrations often deface government property or violate anti-demonstration laws, and who are often arrested for their protests. But they broke the law, you say, and they should be punished. Believe it or not, they usually admit that. They know they broke the law. They did it deliberately, and they often refuse bail when they are arrested. What they want to do is to attract attention, to make people sit up and take notice and do something about what they consider an unjust situation.

Well, this is not a sermon about anti-war or anti-nuclear protesters. It's a homily about today's Gospel. Because, believe it or not, the situation is very much the same. Other people besides Jesus felt that the temple authorities were abusing their power to their own advantage. And in spite of their protests nothing was done about it. So, Jesus comes along, the Gospel story tells us, and performs what really was an outrageous action, far more scandalous than damaging government property since he was apparently desecrating sacred space. This same story appears in the other Gospels as well. And there Jesus justifies his action by saying, "My Father's house is a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves." And John in the passage I just read to you tells us that later on his disciples recalled the saying from their scriptures, "Zeal for your house consumes me."

As always, John the Evangelist has more going on than meets the eye. All the evangelists tell us that Jesus has come, not to destroy or to do away with the ancient laws and customs but to fulfill them. John, however, goes farther than this. From John's perspective Jesus has come to replace many of the traditional Jewish customs, even – and this is extremely bold – to replace the temple. Later in John's Gospel Jesus will tell the Samaritan

woman at Jacob's well that in the future people will worship neither on their mountain nor in the temple, but in spirit and in truth. Since Jesus is the truth as well as the way and the life, worship in the future will be focused on him. John in his own way shows this already happening by having Jesus take over what goes on in the temple, and getting rid of elements that are not part of genuine, authentic worship.

Well, for the people of Jesus' time, this represented a big change. And we know how difficult it is for people to accept change, especially in matters religious. Those of us who are a little older can remember the reaction of so many people to the changes that happened after the Second Vatican Council, particularly the changes in the liturgy. I still hear people complaining. The introduction of Christianity into first century Judaism was revolutionary, and the first Christians, who were all Jews, experienced changes in their beliefs and in their ways of worshiping God which for them were shattering and far more dramatic than anything the Church has gone through since then. The greatest changes in the Church were the ones that happened in the very beginning.

And perhaps the Church gives us the ten commandments as our first reading to point up some of the changes that Jesus made in the law. Consider for instance what happens in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells us what I recalled earlier: that he has not come to do away with the old law but to fulfill it. He recalls the old laws and then he goes on to say how he fulfills it. "You have heard it said of old, You shall not kill. I say to you anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to trial. Of old it was said, Do not commit adultery. But what I tell you is this: if a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery in his heart. Of old it was said eye for eye, tooth for tooth. But what I tell you is this: do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek turn and offer him your left."

What is Jesus doing here? He is reiterating the commandments but saying that in this new order that he is inaugurating even more will be expected of those who follow him. Another great change: Not only is he in a sense replacing the temple, but he is also replacing the law – not by destroying it, any more than he destroyed the temple, but by extending its meaning. It's an extraordinary challenge, representing the highest ideals. The people of Jesus' time who heard it had a hard time accepting it. And

so, of course, do we. When he says “Blessed are the peacemakers,” what are we to think of war? When he says “Do not set yourself against the one who harms you” and when he cancels the old eye for eye notion, what are we to think of the death penalty? It’s easy to become discouraged as we stand before the demands of Christianity. What we must remember is that it was just as difficult for the people of Jesus’ time as it is for us today. We might be tempted to say, as Peter said, “Lord if this is the case, then who can be saved?” But we must also remember what Jesus replied: from a human perspective this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.

And then there is that incident that Paul tells us about when he was praying God to deliver him from what he thought was an impossible situation. God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you.” With my help you can do the impossible.

So, when we are tempted to despair, to give it all up because it just seems too difficult, remember: with the grace of God, the impossible becomes possible.