

HOMILY ST JOHN LATERAN (SUNDAY 32 – A)

(Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; Psalm 46; 1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17; John 2:13-22)

One year after my ordination as coadjutor archbishop of the archdiocese of Keewatin-The pas in 2005, I was part of the group of western bishops who went to Rome for their *Ad Limina* visit. The *Ad Limina* is a journey that all bishops make every five years to meet with the different congregations or dicasteries that govern the Church worldwide and to have an audience with the pope. A strong tradition that is part of that journey is to celebrate the Eucharist in four major churches in Rome: St. Peter's Basilica; the church of Mary Major; St. Paul's Outside the Walls, and St. John Lateran.

Today's feast of the Dedication of St. John Lateran celebrates the anniversary of the dedication of this cathedral church of Rome. Built by Pope Sylvester I in 324, this venerable old church is the *cathedra* or chair of the bishop of Rome. A Latin inscription reads *omnium ecclesiarum Urbis et Orbis mater et caput* (The Mother and Head of all the Churches of the City and of the World). Accordingly, the whole Church celebrates its dedication.

This feast today, which replaces the 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, invites us to reflect on the nature of the Church to which we belong, and to *be Church*, to live the Paschal Mystery of Jesus in our lives.

The book of Revelations provides some interesting background to the readings. It mentions that in the new heavenly Jerusalem, there is no Temple. This is striking because the Temple is the central feature of the Jewish religion. It goes on to say that there is no Temple because in the heavenly Jerusalem, the whole city has become the Temple, for the presence of the Lamb of God fills the city and the whole city is now holy.

In today's second reading, St. Paul comes out with a striking statement. He states bluntly that we, the followers of Jesus, are the building of God. He goes on to insist, even more clearly, that we are the Temple of the living God, build on the foundation stone of Jesus Christ. He asserts that he laid that one and only foundation and now we must build carefully on it and no other.

In the gospel for today, Jesus comes out with another striking statement. When challenged as to why he angrily cleansed the Temple of all commercial activity, he challenged them to destroy this Temple and he would raise it up again. He was speaking of course, of the Temple of his Body that would be killed and raised up to new life through the resurrection. Jesus identifies himself with the Temple. In him, the Temple of the New Jerusalem has become present in our world and in our human history.

According to Capuchin Franciscan Michael Crosby, in his book *Dysfunctional Church*, there is a strong social justice critique implicit in this gospel, one that leads us to critique the way that the Church of today perhaps fails to live out the gospel message of truth, equality, freedom and justice because of its narrow defense of a white, male, clerical,

hierarchical and patriarchal model of Church that has developed over the centuries. There is a danger that the Church has lost its focus on the gospel *mission* out of an excessive and inordinate concern for *maintenance* of present Church structures.

The New Interpreter's Bible provides us with additional information along the same line. Jesus, a complete outsider to the power structure of the Temple worship, issues a challenge that shakes its foundations. He throws Temple worship that day into chaos. No wonder the religious leaders asked who he was to derail their worship.

Jesus explains his actions by pointing to his death and resurrection. Jesus has the authority to challenge the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God acting in the world. This passage then is not about how his anger makes him human like others, but about how he is the focus of God's presence on earth, and that God as made known in Jesus, and not the Temple building, should be the focal point of cultic activity.

The challenge of Jesus to the institutional worship is not anti-Jewish, for he is in line with other prophets like Amos and Zechariah. Jesus is a devout Jew on pilgrimage who challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus' day.

Christian faith communities must be willing to ask when and where the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and closed to the possibility of reformation, change and renewal. The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap or equating the authority of its own institution with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness – whether in the form of Temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices – is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

In his commentary on this gospel, Barclay adds that the reason for Jesus' anger is important. The law states that every male Jew within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was bound to attend, but Jews from all over the world came at least once to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. The law also levied a temple tax of a half shekel to every male Jew over nineteen. While foreign coins of all kinds were honoured, the temple tax had to be paid in Jewish currency, to avoid defilement.

What enraged Jesus was that while some profit was allowed to the money changers, the poor pilgrims were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money lenders and a large surplus was being built up in the temple. That was rampant and shameless social injustice and it was being done in the name of religion.

The pilgrims were also being forced by the Temple system to buy their victims from the Temple booths if they wanted them to be passed by the temple inspectors so that they were unblemished, a second extortion. Jesus could not be passive while the children of

God were being treated in this way in the name of religion.

Other reasons for the anger of Jesus were systemic: worship without reverence; substituting externals of animal sacrifices for true devotion and traffic in the court of the gentiles made prayer impossible, thus shutting out seeking gentiles from communion with God. Jesus recoils against anything that demeans genuine piety and tends to hinder people from worshipping God.

There is in these readings today a challenge to us to journey within our own belief systems and attitudes, to measure them not against the standards of human practices and traditions, but against the raw teachings of Jesus about humility, service, caring for the poor and the vulnerable, love for God, one another and ourselves.

A question we can ask ourselves is the one that has become more popular among the young as of late: “What would Jesus do?” That might be one way of making sure that we are not being led astray by the all too human tendency towards a Church life that is centred more on our need for power, control and status than on the gospel.

In the movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Peter comes to Jesus at night and tries to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem where he might be killed, by telling Jesus that it was their job to prevent him from going ahead with his plan. Jesus looks at Peter, and tells him that he is thinking like men think, not as God thinks. Then Jesus shifts his gaze, looks into empty space, and cries, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” His gaze at the invisible as he says those words is striking - Satan is not so much “in Peter” but everywhere, trying to thwart the coming of God’s kingdom.

The Eucharist calls us to pure worship, to humble ourselves and to repent of any compromise that we might be making in living out a life of faith in who Jesus is and what he wants the church to be.

As we celebrate this feast, it is important to remember along with St. Paul that we are the Church, the Body of Christ, called to support and also challenge each other to be true to the fundamental teachings of Jesus about love and justice for all. We are called to *be the Church* as we strive to live the Paschal Mystery of Jesus in our own lives.