

Bringing Down The House

In a few weeks we will observe Good Friday, the day we remember how Jesus suffered and died for the sins of mankind.

We will read about how the Roman soldiers whipped Jesus with whips made with multiple cords—whips called “lichters”—which were capable of laying flesh bare.

In today’s Gospel lesson, however, Jesus is the one doing the whipping.

When He sees merchants in the house of God, He fashions a whip, upsets their tables, scatters their merchandise and drives them out of the temple, saying: *“How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market?”*

This is the only time in the Scriptures that Jesus shows anger and it made a deep impression on his disciples: it is one of the few incidents in his life and ministry that is recorded in all four Gospels.

The violence of His response to the presence of the merchants and moneychangers in the temple is a measure of the importance that Jesus placed upon worship.

Worship is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind!

But we have a way of turning God’s gifts into duties and worship is no exception.

It’s easy for people to think of worship as an obligation rather than a privilege, something we do for God rather than something that God does for us.

But God gave us worship for OUR sakes, not for His—which is what Jesus meant when he said that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

When we worship, we receive blessing after blessing: our sins are forgiven, our faith is strengthened, we receive the body and blood of Christ which brings us closer to God and to one another, we offer prayers with the assurance that God hears them and will respond to them in the way that is best for us, and we enjoy the friendship and love of our fellow believers.

In worship it is we who are blessed!

So when we allow things to get in the way of our worship, we are only cheating ourselves.

When Jesus said, "*Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I among you*"—He was talking about worship.

When he said, "*The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve,*" He was talking about worship.

Worship is divine service: the service of God to His people.

And since the beginning, God has made it clear that worship is to take place in His House, the House of God, which we call "church."

Some people like to say that you can worship God on a golf course or in a boat as well as at church.

But that's not true: you may think about God or even pray to God in a boat or on a golf course, but that is not worshipping Him.

God created churches for worship.

The first House of worship that God gave His people was the tabernacle, the portable Tent of Meeting that He instructed His people to build and carry with them as they made their journey through the wilderness of Sinai.

And when they gathered around the tabernacle to worship, God would appear in His shekinah, His glory made visible in smoke and fire, and He would fill the tabernacle with His presence.

He led the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night.

But it was to His tabernacle, His house, that he called them to worship Him and receive his blessings.

It was in His tabernacle that He allowed them to offer sacrifices to atone for their sins.

It was in the tabernacle that He invited them to offer up prayers and petitions which He promised to honor.

The tabernacle was Israel's church from the time of Moses until the time of Solomon.

Then God instructed Solomon to raise up a temple for Him in Jerusalem to replace the tabernacle

Described in great detail in *Kings* and *Chronicles*, Solomon's temple was one of the great marvels of the ancient world: a magnificent structure made of stone and cedar, whose walls and furnishings were overlaid with gold and silver.

There the sacrifices continued to be offered up so that the sins of Israel would be forgiven and there the prayers and petitions of the priests for the protection and prosperity of Israel would rise up before the throne of God.

Later in his life Solomon stopped serving God and turned to worshipping pagan idols.

He allowed pagan worship to take root in Israel and spread, in spite of God's explicit instructions that it be wiped out.

And when the Israelites turned away from God and worshipped pagan idols, they cut themselves off from God's grace and their sins began to mount up and weigh on them.

Their social fabric decayed to the point where when Solomon died, civil war erupted and Israel split into two kingdoms which were hostile to each other.

The kings that ruled both kingdoms over the next 300+ years were almost all bad kings who followed in Solomon's footsteps by encouraging the worship of pagan gods.

In the northern kingdom, King Jereboam set pagan shrines at Dan and Bethel.

In the southern kingdom, the priesthood degenerated to the point where they set up pagan idols in the temple and worshipped them in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the temple.

As a result, in 726 B.C. God finally abandoned the northern kingdom to the Assyrians who conquered the Israelites who lived there and assimilated most of them into their pagan culture.

Later, in 586 B.C., He abandoned the southern kingdom to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who conquered Judea, breached the walls of Jerusalem, slaughtered most of the inhabitants and reduced Solomon's temple to a pile of rubble.

This was a catastrophe for the Israelites who had never imagined that God would allow his House to be destroyed.

But God did so, Ezekiel tells us, because the hearts of his people had drifted away from him and turned to idols.

And God cannot help us when we dam up the river of His grace with our idols.

The temple had become a den of iniquity rather than the House of God, so God brought down His house.

Later God raised up His House again among the Israelites.

First, Nehemiah and then Herod the Great restored it and it was once again a marvel to behold.

On one occasion when Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples pointed to it and said: *"Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"*

But Jesus, knowing that nothing made with human hands can last, replied: *"Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

And so it came to pass.

Forty years later the Romans came as the Babylonians had come before.

They tore down the temple and cast its stones into the Kidron valley.

Not one stone was left standing on another.

It was never rebuilt and on the temple mount where it stood, there now stands a structure called the "Dome of the Rock, which is an Islamic Mosque.

Once again, God brought down His house.

And that brings us to today's Gospel which describes how corruption had once again begun to fester in the House of God.

Merchants and moneychangers had brought their businesses into the temple court which was supposed to be dedicated to the worship of God.

This time it was the Son of God who came to cleanse His Father's house.

After Jesus had driven the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple, the Jews demanded that he give them a sign to prove that he had the authority to do so.

He replied: *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days."*

Understandably, the Jews were deeply skeptical.

"It has taken forty-six years to build this temple," they said: *"and you are going to raise it in three days?"*

But then we are told, *"The temple he had spoken of was his body."*

Later they understood what he had meant but it was a difficult thing for them to understand.

How could the body of a man be a temple?

Before we can answer that question, we need to ask: what IS God's House?

The answer is that God's House is the place where sinful man and a righteous God meet and are reconciled through the forgiveness of sins.

In the tabernacle and the temple, the Israelites were reconciled to Yahweh through sacrifices of animals.

In Jesus Christ, all men are reconciled to God through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.

In ancient Israel, once each year the sins of the Israelites were laid on a scapegoat, who would bear them away into the wilderness.

At the cross of Calvary the sins of mankind were laid on a divine Scapegoat who bore them away to a tomb.

In ancient Israel, God and man met on the altar of the tabernacle and the temple.

In Jesus Christ, God and man meet in His body and blood.

Jesus is the true temple, the true House of God.

But that House of God, like the others, had to be brought down.

It had to be brought down so that the church, the new Body of Christ in this world, could be raised up as the place where sinful man and a righteous God meet and are reconciled through the forgiveness of sins. One day this house too will be brought down.

Make no mistake: the Bible makes it clear that as time goes on, the church of God will be increasingly persecuted and attacked and it will finally fall.

The voice of the Gospel will be silenced by the persecution of a sinful world.

But God will raise it up again when this world passes away and He replaces it with the New Jerusalem of God in heaven—a city not made with human hands.

There will be no temple in that city because, "...the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb will be its temple."

There will be no need for, "...the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God will give it light and the Lamb will be its lamp."

And we, "---whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will dwell in it.

But for now, we abide in the body of Christ in this world—the church of Jesus Christ—and we take encouragement and joy in the words our Savior spoke to his disciples on the night before he was brought down.

He said: *"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman*

giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

Praise the Lord and Amen!