

Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 14, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I don't know if this ever happens on any other Sunday or feast day, but there's something very strange about the scriptures today because they seem to indicate that we really ought not to be celebrating the feast of the dedication of a church building, which is what we're doing in this liturgy commemorating the dedication of a huge building located in Rome that has now been designated as the pope's official cathedral church, built in about the fourth century, after Constantine had converted and Christians were free to celebrate in churches.

But the early Christians didn't have any churches. They never dedicated church buildings. They celebrated the breaking of the bread in their homes. Small communities of disciples of Jesus gathered together in homes throughout the Roman Empire, and that's how it was for over 300 years. No churches, no buildings to celebrate and to dedicate, to use almost as a place where we feel that somehow, because it's sacred and we're not, that when we go there, God will not punish us.

I think that's what Jesus meant when he said, "You have made the house of God a den of thieves!" He wasn't thinking about the injustices and the thieving going on that he stopped at that moment, but he was thinking about how a den of thieves is a place where thieves don't do their thieving; they come and find security. We almost have begun to use church buildings like that, as a place of security.

I guess I should first of all say, that seems somewhat logical if you listen to the first lesson today, but remember, this is from the Jewish scriptures, where Ezekiel is speaking about the situation as it was during the first covenant that God made with the people. And for the Jewish people, the temple was a place that was sacred, set apart from everyday life, where God was present in a very special way. That's why Ezekiel will tell us, and was encouraging the people to realize, that this temple was going to be restored.

"The man brought me out to the north gate, led me around outside to the outer gate facing the east, and there I saw the stream coming from the south side."

"And as that stream pours forth, this water goes to the east, down through the Arabah. And when it flows into the sea of foul-smelling water, the water will become wholesome," see, God's blessings are flowing into creation. "Wherever the river flows, swarms of creatures will live in it. the sea water will become fresh. Wherever it flows, life will abound."

"Near the river on both banks there will be all kinds of fruit trees that will not wither and fruit that will never fail. The fruit will be good to eat and the leaves will be used for healing."

For the Jewish people, the temple was that place of God's presence and the source of blessings. But something very dramatic happened at the time of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I remember as a child, always being impressed with this part of the reading of the passion of Jesus during Holy Week, the version according to Matthew where, maybe you remember it too, Matthew describes that at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, darkness covered the whole earth. And then there were eruptions like earthquakes. Everything was in turmoil and even the spirits of the dead seemed to be walking about. And then dramatically the veil of the temple was torn in two - that veil that had separated the sacred from the profane. Behind the veil was the Holy of Holies; now it was torn in two.

So the Christians understood that with Jesus, and through his death, through his resurrection, that the vision that we made between what was sacred and what is profane or secular or worldly, that's gone. Everything is holy. All of creation is filled with God's presence. Jesus has come, lived among us, shared everything with us, and influences now all of creation. So that's why the early Christians began to not have this kind of separation any longer between a sacred place and a worldly place where we live our everyday lives; everything becomes holy.

That's why Paul would say to those Christians at Corinth: "You are fellow workers with God. You are God's building. I, as a good architect according to the capacity given to me, I laid the foundation and another is to build upon it, but let each one be careful how you build. No one laid a foundation other than the one which is already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Jesus is the center of this building which is now the church. He's the foundation. His life permeates the whole church and the whole world.

"Do you not know that you are God's temple, God's spirit abides in you? If anyone destroys this temple of God, God will destroy them. God's temple is holy and you are holy."

And everything in our world is holy. We go back to the beginning of creation when "God looked upon all that God had made and saw that it is good." Everything is good, is holy, is blessed, and every one of us is good and holy and blessed.

Think of some of the implications of this. If we really take seriously that you and I are living stones in this temple, which is God, Jesus present in our midst, we are God's people, we are God's temple, and from us flow the blessings that go out to the whole world. If we really saw this and began to live according to this understanding, how reverent we would be to one another. You see, we'd see every one of us as another image of God. In married life, a husband and wife would be reverential, respectful, and we would look upon every child as someone very sacred and precious.

If we really thought of every one of us as the presence of God, God's temple, it would change all of our relationships, individually and within our families, in our neighborhoods, in our world. We wouldn't be out to destroy other nations; we would be pouring forth God's blessings upon them. If only we really grasped this truth and lived by it.

I think of how different our church would be.

Here in the United States, I think our church is recognized as one of the richest entities in the whole country and the whole world. We have more property, more buildings, more institutions than we can number, really, and we keep building new churches. Out in California, they built two new cathedrals within the last few years, each of which has cost over \$200 million, like *there* is the presence of God somehow. We pour all our wealth into it instead of into people. How different our church would be if we really understood and lived according to this beautiful teaching that is proclaimed to us today.

I've had that experience, as you know, of trying to speak publicly on behalf of abused children and abused by priests, church people. And I've come up against it time after time, where the bishop seems more concerned about, "Well, we'll lose our wealth. We might have to go into bankruptcy if we try to provide what is needed for these wounded children." How wrong that is, that we put more value on our buildings and our wealth than on these temples of God.

I hope as we try to listen deeply to the message of today's scriptures, we really understand that yes, I guess it's okay to celebrate a beautiful building, a great work of art, like St. John Lateran -- it's a great human achievement, but it's not really a symbol of God's presence.

We should begin to understand that you and I are the living presence of God and every other person is filled with that same God light, spirit light, and we should live according to this truth so that we don't have regard so much for buildings as our church, but for every one of us as that living stone which is the living presence of God, bringing blessings to ourselves and to one another, blessings that flow as in that beautiful scene in Ezekiel, from this place out into the whole world, blessings that will transform our world and make it the reign of God that Jesus intends.

[Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily at Homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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