

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Third Sunday of Lent, March 6-7, 2021, Cycle B

St. Paul tells us this weekend: "...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles ..." How foolish is the Gospel? To many people preaching self-denial, taking up our cross, and walking in the footsteps of a Messiah who is crucified is utter foolishness. Even many of Jesus' followers consider the core message of the gospel foolishness, and do not live lives of self-denial. Church history is rife with corrupt people who enriched themselves at the expense of the flock.

There certainly is something about the Gospel that Jesus preaches that turns our normal patterns of understandings upside down. For what seems impressive, or valuable to the world, does not appear impressive to God. Jesus upends conventional wisdom all the time saying such things as "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" and "Whoever saves his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it."

Jesus was anything but a conformist. Instead of embracing cultural assumptions, Jesus liked to throw out challenges that caused people to stop right in their tracks. In today's Gospel story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, Jesus throws a challenge right in the face of the political and religious leaders. Right in the temple precincts Jesus causes a ruckus driving out the oxen, sheep, and doves; and overturning the money changers' tables. We need to understand that the practice of buying and selling in the temple area was not considered blasphemous. One might even argue that the merchants were providing a necessary service for a good religious cause, since the pilgrims needed sacrifices to offer. Besides, the buying, selling and money changing was taking place in the very outer court of the Temple – where even Gentiles were free to roam – not in the sacred inner sanctums.

Somehow though, Jesus, became perturbed by the casualness with which the whole Temple commerce was carried out – a casualness that failed to remember that God is at the center of it all. Apparently, commerce had become more important than God. God's house had truly become a market place rather than being first and foremost a place of worship and prayer. Human conventions can sometimes blind us to reality. What was in and of itself legitimate (the selling of animals for sacrifices) had come to profane what was holy by knocking the holy out of the central place.

However, before we are too quick to criticize the people of Jesus' day for losing their focus with their Temple activities, we might ask ourselves, "If Jesus came today to my own house of worship, what might he do? After all, Lent is meant to challenge us to look at our own selves, and see where we are wanting and in need of conversion. So we turn the light of Jesus' unconventional (foolish if you will) wisdom on ourselves and ask: If Jesus came into my parish church today, would Jesus recognize our celebration of the Eucharist as the same gift he left his disciples as a remembrance of himself? Could he find his way through all the rites and rituals?

What would he think of the rich décor of some of our churches, which now have to be locked to guard them against theft? Would he evaluate the amount we spend on our programs for feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless, and find it wanting? Would Jesus hear preachers defend the marginalized, the undocumented and all the victims of injustice? Would he see in each of us a reflection of the love that God has lavished on us without measure? How are we doing at making temples of our lives?

Perhaps the last line of today's Gospel will help us sort out the answers to these questions: "Jesus did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well." Therefore, it is with a sense of humble confidence that we take the measure of ourselves at Lent. We may not always meet the challenge of our belonging to Christ, but he who knows our hearts and our nature also knows our good attempts at holiness as well as our failures.