

HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 3 – B
“Spring Cleaning of the Soul”

Are you looking forward to spring?

Make this Third Week of Lent a spring cleaning of the Soul

After the long months of snow and cold, many people can't wait to clean up the residue of winter – to house clean with doors open; to rake the yard, clean out garages, start preparing the soil for the garden, and burn all that needs to be burned. One can almost smell the smells of spring.

Spring is also a privileged time to do some spring cleaning of the soul. The readings for this Third Sunday of Lent call us to not just clean up around us, but also to do some cleansing, healing work within us, some soul work.

The first reading reminds us of the high standards that God asked of the Chosen people – the Ten Commandments. It also brings to mind one of the finest scenes from the movie by that name. Moses came down the mountain bearing the 10 Commands written by the finger of God on stone tablets. He found the people had already rebelled. He was stunned and angry. Before he had time to read the commands to them, he found they were breaking most of them. To top it all, they had made a brazen calf they were worshipping as a god, breaking especially the first command, “You shall have no other god before me.” Moses shattered the tablets on the ground. God's Word lay in useless fragments. Already, God's chosen people with whom God had just made a covenant, were in need of reform, renewal, soul cleansing.

After this event and being chastised by Moses, the people did repent and heed the commands. They built first an ark for the Lord in the desert, then finally a temple in Jerusalem to house God's presence. All the Jews came to worship and offer sacrifice there.

Centuries after Moses, however, the gospel shows us Jesus (the New Moses, the New Temple) going into that very same temple just before the feast of the Passover. What he saw, people buying and selling, made him as angry as Moses. He took action, and drove the sellers out. According to John, Jesus shouted, “Take all this out of here - stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!”

What made Jesus so angry was that worship of God had been turned into a business, with people profiting, even being unjust to the poor, in God's name. First, there was price-gouging. In that religious culture, the temple tax had to be paid in Jewish currency, along with an exchange fee – an extra burden for the poor. Then there was extortion. To be acceptable, the sacrifices could not be bought from vendors in the city, but had to be bought from temple booths at higher prices. On top of that, the buying and selling had moved into the court of the gentiles, preventing them from worshipping the God of Israel. All this traffic and trafficking had developed into an externalism and worship without reverence that had become normal for cultic Judaism.

Religion itself had become an addiction, a false god. The business of worship, of appearing justified,

of purchasing a bigger sacrifice than others, had become an end in itself, a god that these people served first and foremost. They had fallen into idolatry as surely as their ancestors in the desert. Somewhere, deep in the Holy of Holies, dwelt the ark, the symbol of God's presence here on earth, but that was forgotten by people who placed business, ritual, and the routine of worship, above the real reason for it.

Let us move now to another temple, ourselves. By baptism, we have become temples of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God. If Jesus were to walk into the temple of our hearts and minds right now, what would he see? What would he do? What would he have to drive out? Would he be hurt and angry because there is idolatry within, pushing him aside into second or third place in our hearts? Are we breaking the first commandment too?

Few of us are tempted to worship graven images. But idolatry is still all around us, and perhaps within us. Idols don't have to be carved out of stone or forged into brazen calves for people to bow down and worship them. We can make idols out of money and possessions. We neglect our kids because of bingo, work, sports or gambling. We can make idols out of social status and prestige; out of power trips, resentment and control.

One definition of addiction is that it is idolatry, worshipping a false god. A shock to one person was to be told that as a work-a-holic, he was breaking the first commandment. Though he believed in God, he did not really trust God's love, but rather trusted his ability to work hard and earn that love. He was worshipping a false God - work! If what we put our time and money into takes the place of God in our lives, then we are committing idolatry and worshipping a false God.

Sad to say, even religion can become an idol, an addiction, when it becomes an escape from the pain of being human, or a habit or routine for its own sake, instead of a personal relationship with a living God who touches our hearts, transforms our lives, and gives us the courage to deal with our painful issues. There is even a book written by the title, *When God Becomes a Drug!*

Today is a good time, with the words of an angry Jesus ringing in our ears, to take a good look at our false gods, and to spring clean our soul. We can go into the temple of our minds and bodies, by going out into the wilderness of our own personal desert with Jesus.

One person did that during a retreat. He worked the Steps of the 12 step program. First, he did a searching and fearless moral inventory of his wrongdoing, and realized how he had hurt people because of his anger, stubbornness and pride. He celebrated reconciliation with a priest for all that, and received God's forgiveness. Then he went deeper into his temple, and desert - into where his hurtful behaviour and anger was coming from. He began to remember hurtful and shaming incidents that had scarred him and put anger within him as a child, a teenager, and as a young adult. He expressed that anger in a positive way, and wrote a letter to a young person who had wasted some of his possessions, and an older person who had hurt him, sharing his feelings with them with love. He did some grieving for the losses that were involved from these past hurts.

Then he moved on to Step 9 which asks us to make amends to those we hurt, and wrote another letter to an elder asking for forgiveness for arguing with him. As he prayed and asked the real,

loving God of Jesus Christ to remove his resentments and grief, he actually felt a lifting of his spirit, and rejoiced at the healing power of God in Jesus.

Let us celebrate the Eucharist today, knowing that this humble meal is spiritual food for our journey, through desert and wilderness, back to the real God, who frees us from our addictions to the false gods we turned to in our hurts of the past, false gods that trap us and can even destroy us.

To present Jesus only as a wonder-worker, faith-healer or magician, would be to make a false god of another kind. His kingdom is a matter of the heart. Let us become image-breakers, and break up our false idols, our false gods, and leave them, not God's will, lying as so many useless fragments on the ground.

So, put your faith in Jesus, the power and wisdom of God. Do some soul spring cleaning, let him heal you, and help you worship him in justice and in love.