

Lent III Year B

“You will raise the Temple in three days?...but Jesus was speaking of the Temple of his body.”

This is going to be something of a teaching sermon, which many of you have told me you appreciate from time to time...in point of fact it is one of the things I promised to do when I said my ordination vows....But today's dramatic narrative of Jesus over-turning the money changers' tables and flogging the money-changers and merchants in the Temple courtyard, begs for some context. The lectionary elves have departed from Mark this Sunday, and have had us read John's account of the so-called temple tantrum. And we had just gotten on a roll as to understanding the chief issues of Mark...so since we will from here throughout Easter be reading a great deal from John's Gospel, I think a little excursus as to the chief theme of John will stand us in good stead as we read John's coming accounts of the betrayal, and death and resurrection of Jesus.

So where do we begin in getting something of a handle on this the most enigmatic of the gospels. You know the answer....We look first to the prologue.....because as you also know, as Aristotle points out in his *Poetics*, the prologue lets us know what the ensuing text is chiefly about....the prologue gives us a predisposed perspective, a cheat sheet, as it were, as to how to read the rest of the gospel.

Many of y'all have seen the movie *2001 A Space Odyssey*? Well you may remember the very last dramatic scene of the movie....one sees the earth from space and towards the earth is drifting an unborn almost mature fetus in the amniotic sac drifting towards earth with decided purpose to Straus's *Thus spake Zarathustra*. My friends and I spent many a night in college dorm rooms over a beer arguing just what this meant. Stanley Kubrick the writer and director of *2001* referred to this stunning image as the star child....we all agreed that the image was one of new birth....but what sort of new birth...we would still be arguing about it if we were all still at Sewanee. But in an interview with Kubrick a few years before he died, published posthumously, he was asked where he got the idea for this image, this fetus almost the size of earth on the screen....and his answer was that he got the idea from the prologue to John's Gospel...well that's pretty cool...so let's look briefly at the prologue, and try to get a sense of where John is coming from, a sense of what his gospel will be about:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...

...all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

So we know that this gospel is one of Christology, a gospel about the true nature of Christ...I am Vine...I am bread...I am wine...I am shepherd... I am gate; I am light... we hear throughout this gospel;...but the key word here is Logos, Word....a word very important in Greek philosophy... it means divine knowledge....quite literally a communicative link between heaven and earth...and here the gospel writer makes the audacious claim that Jesus the Christ is the word, that was and is of God, the same as God, since the beginning....the divine Logos, the Word made human... that the truth of the universe is seen and known in the human son... Jesus, the Word the author of life and light still creating the cosmos as it was in the beginning...and John makes the other startling claim, that this divine light is the light of humankind....so for John's theology there is no separating the divinity of the Christ from the divinity of those who follow him...humanity and divinity same substance as it were....As Jesus is being identified, we are being shown our true identity as well...we disciples who Jesus says will do greater things than he. Jesus, here, the model of the true human, the way we are all made, Jesus the lens through whom God sees us... I don't think many modern Christians believe that....that we carry God's very DNA...in protestant and Roman Christianity we are too busy putting ourselves down, or being put down by the church....which is an easy way to abdicate our Word-ness....all of us are star children, children of a divine purpose.

Over the entire sweep of Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament in one way or another the scribes are all concerned with the relationship between God and humankind, and the dynamic nature of that relationship, the rockiness of that relationship, and the joy of it...you remember the stories: In the beginning in Genesis, God set the sun and the moon to rule over the Earth...and then in Sinai God descends onto the mountain tops.... and then God descends into the camp of Israel and is carried in the ark...on the move as God's people were on the move...God with them in their victories and defeats....and finally once settled in the promised land the king proposes to build a Temple for God's dwelling....That was not without great controversy...I can only imagine that vestry meeting!...the prophet Hosea laments on behalf of God... "that you my people would imprison me in a house made of stone." After the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians centuries later, and after the exile in Babylon, the deported Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple still not without controversy....there is a passage in Nehemiah wherein at the completion of the second Temple there was great rejoicing, but also wailing and disgust... sort of a model of the modern church!....So though the Temple was considered by many the center of Jewish life, there was always abundant critique...and that brings us to this morning's gospel reading.

In Jesus' time the Temple and its authorities had special dispensation from Rome to practice their sacrifices, and so because of this favor they were in league with Roman governance...they were to keep an eye on would be revolutionaries in their midst...they were vassals essentially to keep the peace on behalf of the empire. So not only had the Temple become institutionalized in its own right, but institutionalized under the auspices of Rome, the empire, the oppressor....So the anger here in this passage is not so much about the buying and selling of animals and money-changing going on...that was normal Temple practice....pilgrims from all parts of the realm would come to the festivals and exchange their money to buy an animal offering for the priests to sacrifice at the high altar....No the point here, and the source of anger, is that self serving institutions, like stones are bound to crumble...If institutions become self serving as institutions are want to do... and cease to see that for which they truly exist and cease to continually adapt then they are doomed, that's true of all institutions: governments, corporations, even families....Of course the writer of John writing around 100 has the benefit of hindsight of the catastrophic razing of the Temple which occurred in 70 under the Roman general Titus.

But the point is still well taken, institutions for the sake of self-preservation will pass away, institutions that capitulate to self interest who in essence sell their soul will die....God has moved from the heavens, to the mountain tops, with and among the people and then God is institutionalized in a Temple, a house of stone....and now Jesus tells us in this Gospel that it is the people of God, the people of God acting in history who are the Temple of God, this is the radical heart of our faith, that Incarnation is about us... the promised indwelling of God is in our very hearts and souls....so that we may stand together, flesh and blood against the powers of evil in our world... It is certainly human nature to want to capture what we believe is the truth, institutionalize it, dogmatize it, build a booth as it were....but truth is on the move...re articulating itself given the fact that the world changes still...the Temple of God is made of hearts of flesh....our hearts, our souls and bodies the means by which God's love is given to the world....the word became human and informs our history, shaping and reshaping that history into the vision of God's egalitarian reign in earth...Jesus the archetype for the human community....the word became human because we were, I dare say, we were the only way God discovered to be the means to let God's love loose upon the earth.

So brother and sister star-children it is time to own our god-likeness and the responsibility that comes with being Word made human...take courage and know that there are many with you willing to risk bearing this divine life, this new, this renewed life of compassion and justice and dignity to the world...take courage and know that your labor will make all things new, will bring things into being, just as our prologue says about us...and perhaps, just perhaps, in a matter of just three days.