

### Third Sunday of Lent: He Understood Them Well

He knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

He understood that it did not take long for people to turn the magnificent new temple, a wonder of the ancient world, into a marketplace. Money was there to be made. People were required to provide a sacrifice for various reasons. To be sure that the animal was worthy of being sacrificed, only those animals that the Temple would provide could be sacrificed. And, of course, they were sold at an exorbitant price. And to add extra to the profit from selling the animals, only the Hebrew shekel could be used to purchase them. But the currency outside of the Temple was the Roman denarii. Therefore, first the devout Hebrew would have to go to the money changer, which, conveniently, was located right there in the Temple. He would have to exchange his Roman currency for shekels, paying the money changers' rates and commissions. Then he would go to the animal merchants. The more he paid for the animal, the greater the sacrifice. There was money to be made. It was easy to turn the worship of God into a cash cow, both figuratively and literally.

There were people who used the Temple worship to make money. There were and are people who use religion to make money. It is said that a visitor to the Vatican was overwhelmed with the beauty of the Basilica of St. Peter's. He asked a priest he saw walking in St. Peter's square, "What did this cost?"

The priest answered, "Northern Europe."

The determination to raise money to build the basilica led money grubbing preachers to sell indulgences at a nifty price. In Germany the preacher, Johann Tetzel, promised release from purgatory for buying a dispensation to support the building of St. Peter's. Departed loved ones could be freed. "As the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory," he and many others like him proclaimed. He even promised release from punishment due to the buyer's personal sin, even sins that the buyer had not yet committed. The indulgence sellers raised quite a bit of money for the building, for themselves, and for all up the ladder to the papal coffers. As you know, the selling of indulgences tipped Martin Luther off. He challenged the Church on this issue and ninety four others and began what became known as the Protestant Reformation. Northern Europe ended up becoming Protestant.

Now, do not get the idea that the reformers were so pious and pure in their intentions. Leaving the Roman Catholic Church gave kings, and dukes and earls and counts the opportunity to seize the property of the Church. There were vast monastic lands that supported the local towns and villages. They were taken. A great deal of money was made by the nobility of Northern Europe in the name of what they called true religion.

Jesus knows how people can twist the sacred commands of His Father into a

money making scheme. He looks on so many from televangelists to priests who have found ways to make a profit on religion. He sees how some people could transform a valid charity, such as caring for the poor, into an opportunity to make money for themselves. How sad it is that charitable organizations in the United States are given star ratings by some rating systems if only over 65% of the money they take in is spent on program activities. On the same token, how wonderful it is that these same non-Catholic rating agencies give Catholic Relief Services a 89% rating and three stars. Catholic Relief Services, or CRS, spends very little on advertisement and administration and sends 94% of the money it collects directly to the poor. Some years back, during a famine in Africa, the government of the United States set aside money to relieve the suffering. To be sure the money got to where it was intended our government called on Catholic Relief Services to administer the funds. Now Jesus had to be looking at that and smiling.

Some say that this is a dog eat dog world. They say that you can only succeed by preventing others from succeeding. They say that people reach the top of the ladder by climbing over others. The Lord knows human nature. He sees this. But he also sees so many people who work hard to succeed in an honest way, a way that cares for others, a way that does not take advantage of others. The Lord sees so many of you folks who have succeeded the right way, the honest way. He sees how generous you are to those who need help. He sees how you have turned against the instinct to make money on the backs of others. For so many people Number One is Jesus Christ. When they hear the saying, "Take care of Number One first," they do not see themselves as the reason for their work. They see Jesus Christ present in the needs of their spouse, their children, their families and all those who are hungry, thirsty, or in need of any sort.

Jesus cleansed the Temple because people had turned it into an abomination, a marketplace, not a place to worship. The Jews, and by that the *Gospel of John* means the leaders of the Jewish people, asked him to give them a sign that he is called by God to do this. They wanted a miracle. He responded, "Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up in three days." He was speaking about the Temple of his body that would be raised up in three days after they attempted to destroy him. They would receive their miracle. It would be an empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

The empty tomb. The resurrection of the Lord is a call to faith, faith that there is infinitely more to life than the physical, the here and now. The empty tomb is a call to the spiritual. It is a call for all who follow Jesus Christ to join Him in eternal life. And so rich and poor alike, and all in between, are called to live only for the Lord. This is difficult for the rich because they have so many distractions from what they really need. This is difficult for the poor because their poverty can lead them to envy others, and to long for that which they really do not need. And it is difficult for all of us because we continually have to reorganize our priorities in life.

The great blessing of the Season of Lent is that it calls us to take a close look at ourselves. How well are you and I living for God?

He know us all. He does not need anyone to testify about human nature. He knows the direction the world tries to point us. And he knows how hard we fight to walk a different way than the way of the world. He knows how hard we fight to walk in His Light.

May this Lent guide us in the journey of our life.