

III SUNDAY OF LENT - 4th March 2018

DESTROY THIS TEMPLE, AND IN THREE DAYS I WILL RAISE IT UP - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 2,13-25

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

In John's gospel, chapter 2 in the episode of the wedding at Cana the evangelist presents a change of the alliance with the transformation of the water into wine. The water served for the purification because the law made the people feel guilty, always in debt and always in need of purification to obtain the love of God that had to be merited. The wine is the image of the free love. Jesus' God does not love for the merit of a person, but for their needs. Well, this new relationship between God and mankind, now involves the disappearance of the institutions of the old alliance, the first of which is the temple. Let's read the evangelist John, chapter 2,13-25.

"The Passover of the Jews was at hand," this denomination is strange because in the Old Testament it always talks about the Passover, it was the feast of liberation, of the Lord. Why here in John's gospel, it talks about the Passover of the Jews? Jews are meant as the religious authority. Because it is the feast of the rulers of the people. The people in this feast are exploited, they are oppressed. So those who celebrate are the leaders and not the people.

"And Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found ..." it is the first time that Jesus enters into the temple and already the evangelist tells us that Jesus and the temple are incompatible. One demands the elimination of the other. And every time for Jesus there will be a situation of conflict, so much so that later it will be in the temple where they will try to stone him, to assassinate him.

“...he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons,” why? Every Jewish male was obliged to come to Jerusalem to offer a lamb at Easter, but not only a lamb, but other animals too. Well three weeks before Easter the selling took place, but where? These animals must be of good quality, and have guarantees. So there was a large herd on the slopes of the Mount of Olives where the animals could be bought to be sacrificed in the temple. The owner of this herd and the holder of the licenses of the butchers of Jerusalem was the high priest Ananias with all his family. So it was a massive traffic, a big business. Here is what Jesus finds in the temple.

He found the sellers of bulls, sheep and doves *“.. and the money-changers sitting there.”* One understands the reality, that the true God of the temple is money and not the Father. *“And making a whip of cords,”* the Messiah is represented with a whip in his hand, but the whip was to punish sinners. Well Jesus does not punish sinners, those who are excluded from the temple, but Jesus with the whip punishes what was the soul of the temple, the vendors, the representatives of the whole religious institution, of the high priests.

“.. he drove them all out of the temple,..” first come *“..the sheep..”* because sheep are the image of God’s population that Jesus has come to take away from this institution fold. *“..and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers.”* Here is the true cult of the temple *“..and overturned their tables And he told those who sold the pigeons”* it is strange that Jesus, taking the proportion of the animals, there are the sellers of oxen and sheep, because Jesus only accuses the sellers of doves? Because the dove was the animal that the poor could afford to offer in sacrifice for the forgiveness of their sins.

And Jesus is angry with these, why? Jesus’ God and the God of the temple are incompatible. One is a God that asks even to the poor, those that have nothing, he asks in continuation. The other is the God that gives, the God that offers himself. *“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”* This was what the religious authorities and leaders had reduced the temple of Jerusalem to. It was reduced to a market place and a great bank. Why are Jesus and the temple incompatible? Because the temple presents a demanding God that continues to ask for offers and sacrifices. Jesus’ Father will be completely different, he will not ask for sacrifices, but it will be he that will offer himself to mankind.

The disciples naturally do not understand Jesus’ gesture, they actually see it in a completely different way. *“His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*

It comes from psalm 69, they think Jesus is a kind of prophet Elijah, he who with violence imposed the restoration and observance of the law of Moses.

And even the religious leaders and the Jews react. Then the Jews reacted saying *“ What sign..”* meaning with what authority, *“...do you show us for doing these things?”* And here is the novelty that Jesus had brought. Jesus answered them, *“Destroy this....”* Here the evangelist does not use the Greek term that indicates the vast religious complex, but indicates a sanctuary, there where God’s presence was believed to be. So Jesus says *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*

Naturally neither the Jews nor the disciples understand, but it is a new reality. With Jesus, God dwells the hearts of men, in people. There is no more need for people to go to a temple to offer, to submit to certain rules. Some were excluded, but Jesus is the only true sanctuary where love and

God's mercy radiate and Jesus goes searching specifically for those who have been excluded, marginalized and rejected by religion.