

Picture in your mind's eye the scene described in our Gospel reading. It's Passover. Many people, like Jesus and his disciples, have come to Jerusalem. It's a busy place. The temple area has many tables and booths set up. Some were exchanging foreign money for the money that was accepted at the temple. Others were selling animals needed for sacrifices. The oxen and the sheep would have been tied up. The pigeons would have been in cages. Jews from far and wide were milling about, perhaps dickering for better rates and prices. This was a normal day, full of busyness. Those familiar with how things were done wouldn't think anything of it.

As you heard, Jesus thought differently. He made a whip from cords and went on a rampage. I don't know what else to call it. He had to have been very forceful to make these merchants leave their stalls with all their money, but he did. He drove them all out of the temple. The sheep and the oxen were unleashed so that they were running about in the midst of the people. Jesus took the tills of money and dumped them on the ground so that coins were splashed everywhere. He kicked over tables and pulled over booths.

That's quite a scene! Does the thought enter your mind: "Was Jesus in the right here?" It sounds like disorderly conduct. However important that question might be, I'd like to set that question aside. I think there is a better, more interesting question: What must the fire have been like that was burning in Jesus? What spurred him on to do what he did? That took courage. That took energy. Jesus cared. It was as the psalm says: "**Zeal for your house has eaten me up!**"

So what has gotten Jesus so upset? The answer to that question is so foreign that it is almost incomprehensible to us. The reason why Jesus is so upset is because he cares about people praying. He wants people to pray to his Father. The temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations. That purpose was being thwarted by what these merchants were doing. He says in our reading, "**Take these things away; do not make my Father's house into a house of trade.**" The temple was the dwelling place of God's Name. People could call upon God's Name in that place.

I must say, and to our shame, we have nothing of the fire that burned in Jesus. When was the last time that you were upset—really upset? Did it have anything to do with prayer? Did it have anything to do with conscience, which is closely related? Having a good conscience towards God is indispensable for praying with confidence. Were you upset because these things were being hampered for you or for others? Probably not.

The last time you were really upset was probably because something bad happened to you. Somebody made a mistake and it created an inconvenience. Somebody hurt you. Somebody said something bad about you. Your quality of life was hampered, and maybe you went on a rampage about that. But prayer? Conscience? These are thought to be back-burner concerns. This is why Jesus is so incomprehensible to us. "**Zeal for God's house had eaten him up.**" When have you had zeal for being in God's house, for praying? Maybe never!

But maybe you haven't known any better. That wouldn't be surprising. What most people believe is really important is their quality of life. The stuff they get really upset about is how things are going for them in this life. If any thought is given to God it is usually fleeting and feeble. It's usually not much

more than, “Yes, God exists. I try my best, so I should be fine. That’s enough of that! Let’s get back to the business of living life to its fullest!”

The same thing is usually true with those who deny God’s existence. They usually don’t put a lot of thought into it. They maybe heard of some stuff from the Bible that they thought was impossible or ridiculous. That settles it for them. They say something different from you. They say, “God doesn’t exist,” but then what? The refrain is the same: “Let’s get back to the business of living life to its fullest!” This life looms the largest for people.

This carries over into people’s thoughts about heaven too. Most people think that heaven will just be a continuation of this life, but without annoyances. People will spend their time in heaven doing those things that they liked best. The happy farmer on earth will farm in heaven, but maybe without any weeds. The person who loves riding horses is going to ride horses eternally.

Although these kinds of thoughts about heaven are extremely common, they are not thought about very deeply. People simply fail to notice, for example, that with this conception of heaven people continue to ignore God in heaven just like they ignored God in this life. Or, again, people will be seeking their own advantage in this supposed heaven, just as they sought their own advantage in this life.

But ignoring God and seeking one’s own advantage is probably a more accurate description of hell than it is of heaven. God will not be ignored in heaven, nor will any of those in heaven *want* to ignore him. Nobody will be seeking their own advantage in heaven—just the opposite in fact. The opposite of seeking your own advantage is love. Heaven is the place where love is. God is there, and, as the Scriptures say, “**God is love.**”

In fact, a great transformation must take place in us for us to be happy in this place. We must be made holy. Sin must be purged from us. We must be filled with love from the top of our heads to the soles of our feet. For the first time since we were born we will know what pure love is. For the first time we will be capable of loving with our whole heart. We will receive love from God and from all his creatures and we will love right back. Is there anything better than being loved and loving in return?

So how can we go on the way we have been? How can we not care about our relationship with God? How can we not care about other people’s relationship with God?

Maybe an illustration would help get across what I’m trying to say. I’m sure you’ve noticed how toddlers like to play with blocks. They like to build them up into a tower and knock them down. They do it over and over again. They are happy to spend their time that way. Maybe, to them, there’s no better way to spend one’s time. We, who are grown, however, know that’s not true. I’m assuming that none of you built towers today so that you could knock them down again. You occupy yourself with higher things that more fully engage your abilities.

When Jesus drove the people out of the temple because they were merely engaging in trade while being totally mindless towards God, it was as though Jesus were telling them to quit playing with blocks.

You're too old for that. There is something higher, better, and more important. Prayer, conscience, knowing God—this is what we were made for. We weren't made to play with blocks our whole lives.

But people can be pretty serious about their blocks. CEOs, presidents, those who are wise according to worldly standards, those who are strong, those who are of noble birth—they easily believe that their affairs are a cut above everyone else's. Their blocks are really important. But even if a person were the CEO of the biggest company, even if a person were the president of the whole world—something that doesn't even exist—that would still be like playing with blocks. Knowing God through knowing Christ is the way that we become the creatures that we are meant to be.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is angry and upset because people are being turned aside from what is truly good for stuff that is worthless and passing away. Jesus says in another place: **“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, but to lose his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** How many jet skis does it take? How many vacations will produce a sufficient quality of life? These are building blocks that give but a little thrill.

We would do well to catch a little of the fire that was in Jesus. We would do well to be zealous for the same things Jesus was zealous about, because he wanted what was good and valuable for people. Our hearts and our neighbors' hearts easily and naturally get captured by all kinds of things so that we think nothing of God, or almost nothing of God. This and that capture our love and devotion instead. Well, this and that are lame.

God is good. He is life-giving. Missing out on him is more than enough to make a person upset.