

In this story we get an image of Jesus as a one-man wrecking crew, swinging a sledgehammer rather than a whip. A lot of you are home owners and you know that there is no way to make improvements in an old house without making a mess first. There is plaster dust, dirt, nails and mounds of trash. It is hard work. It's even impossible to paint without getting some on yourself. I am sure that Jesus absorbed a few skinned knuckles that day, not to mention getting his clothes dirty. His faith community needed a good housecleaning and Jesus took it upon himself to do just that with zeal and determination.

For centuries the Jewish people had come to the temple to be in the presence of their God. The temple area covered some 35 acres. It had originally been built by Solomon about 950 B.C., but was burned to the ground by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. A smaller Temple was rebuilt in 516 B.C. It was desecrated and stripped by the Persians in 168 B.C. and cleansed and restored by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C. The temple in which Jesus found himself amid these merchants and money sharks was the new grand temple begun by Herod the Great in 20 B.C. It was not yet completed at the time of our story and was not finished until 68 A.D., a short time before its complete destruction and final in 70 A.D.

With this long history of the Temple in the life of the Hebrew people, we can grasp how important a shrine this was. From the very beginning of the Hebrew people, **sacred places** had been important to the patriarchs. Then, the tabernacle, the traveling shrine of a tent, had been the center of the life of the Hebrew community.

However, just as the people longed for a monarchy with a throne like the other peoples had, they wanted a permanent shrine. The most popular of all their kings, David, gathered the materials for his son Solomon to build the first temple on Mount Moriah, where legend said Abraham and his son Isaac had an encounter with the presence of God that essentially began the Jewish faith. The temple had always symbolized for the people the presence of their most holy God. That is why it was so important that, after each time the Temple was destroyed, it would later be restored to proclaim once again the promised presence of the Almighty and Holy One of Israel.

When Jesus says destroy this grand complex and he will restore the temple in three days, he was clearly talking about again **a new location** for finding the presence of God. Every destruction and desecration of the temple was painful and the new covenant in Jesus would be a painful change again. It would force people to rethink their relationship with their God.

No longer would people come to the temple to find God; they would soon find God coming to them and present everywhere in his church. Each opportunity to change and grow includes the pain of what we leave behind; every time we have to re-evaluate our choices, hopes and dreams it is painful; the cross that awaits Jesus will be painful. There is no other way to move ahead.

Was there corruption in the temple merchandising? There probably was and it probably had the worst impact on the poor and powerless. But worse, the people and even the temple authorities had lost sight of how essential the living presence of God was to their whole religious life.

They were lost in the ritual details; they had lost sight of the core of their faith. In the time of Abraham, God had stopped a ritual killing that humans created; in the time of Moses, God had traveled with his people; when exiled in Babylon, they did not leave their God behind. God was always with his people, not trapped in a temple. Calling them back to that essential relationship would be painful. And Jesus was passionate to restore and redefine that relationship.

If you have a picture in your head of '*Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild*'- as the old hymn goes - then today's Gospel ought to make you think again. It certainly is not in accord with what the scriptures tell us about Jesus. It is most likely a 19th Century invention and probably comes from the sort of edifying pictures the Victorians thought were appropriate to childhood nurseries in middle class households – what we used to call in my seminary days the “Breck Shampoo Jesus” who passed through the world like a male “Mary Poppins.”

But this kind of image of a sweet and saccharine Jesus is really quite subversive and does true religion no good whatever. What it does is turn our Saviour into a weak-minded do-gooder. It strips him of his divinity and authority and turns him into a kind of inoffensive romantic with a nice sideline in miracles. That is not Jesus. That is not the Christ of the Gospels. That is not the Savior who died for us on the cross. And that is certainly not the Christ who used brute force to clean out of the Temple.

For a 1000 years the temple has been a sacred place. What Jesus did that day what had to be painful for him as faithful Jew, but change was coming soon for his people.

He did what would anger the temple authorities and seal their plans to eliminate him. And he did it knowing full well the consequences of his actions.

We use the word “passion” to describe what motivated him to demonstrate the painful state of Jewish religious life and we use the word “passion” to describe his freely accepted, painful death that would usher in the new covenant. In each case “passion” means a total commitment to the will of his Father.

Lent asks us to be angry at the way our society has conspired to eliminate the presence of God from our daily lives. It asks us to be angry at the way the poor, the powerless and the excluded ones are treated in our world. It asks to be passionate about restoring our relationship with our God. It asks us to be committed to whatever penitential practices that will make that presence of God in our lives our first priority. The gospel today does not ask us to be meek and mild and inoffensive; it asks us to be passionate.