

The New Temple

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A

In our second reading this morning, St. Paul addresses the Corinthians and reminds them in these words of who and what they are in Christ: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are” (1 Cor 3.16-17). This echoes the words of Leviticus that we just heard: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lv 19.2).

For Jews, the word “Temple” had a very specific meaning: it meant the consecrated place in Jerusalem where Israel worshiped God by offering sacrifice. Since the First Letter to the Corinthians was written in about A.D. 57, the great Temple in Jerusalem was still standing, and the priests of the tribe of Levi and the House of Aaron continued to offer sacrifice there. It would be thirteen more years till the Romans destroyed the Temple, leaving hardly a stone on stone (Mt 24.2).

The Temple complex was composed of a series of courts, each more sacred than the one before it. There were the Courts of the Gentiles and of Women; then farther in there was the Court of the Israelites, which all Jewish men could enter. After that came the Holy Place, which was reserved for priests, whose office was hereditary. Then, behind a veil or curtain, there was the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could enter once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was there that the Ark of the Covenant once contained the stone tablets on which the finger of God himself had written the Ten Commandments (Ex 25.10-22). The Ark had a gold cover that our English Bibles call the Mercy Seat, for it was there that God had promised to be present to his people when they called upon him.

The very structure of the Jerusalem Temple was highly symbolic, for it was a miniature model of the entire universe, a microcosm of all God’s creation. The outer courts symbolized the visible earth—that is, the land and sea. The Holy Place represented the visible heavens; and finally, the Holy of Holies symbolized heaven, the dwelling place of God himself. The veil or curtain that marked the entrance to the Holy of Holies was made of fine linen, with blue and purple and scarlet thread, so as to symbolize the starry heavens (Ex 26.31-35).

Over the Mercy Seat, there were two images of two angels called cherubim, made of gold, who guarded the Ark. Remember that the Lord had placed two cherubim as guardians of Eden after the fall of Adam and Eve. The Holy of Holies was the nearest approach to Paradise, to God’s own presence, that was possible for mankind after the Fall. Thus the Temple was decorated with images of flowers and trees and pomegranates, suggestive of Paradise, of the Garden of Eden.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the true Temple; the great building in Jerusalem was only a type or symbolic preview of him. Remember that Jesus called himself Lord of the Sabbath (Mt 12.8) and said to his opponents, “I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here” (Mt 12.6). St. John tells us that, when asked for a sign, Jesus answered,

“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 spoke of 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 which Jesus had spoken” (Jn 2.19-22).

St. Matthew tells us that at the death of Jesus, “the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Mt 27.51-52).

What does tearing of the Temple veil mean? It means that the old world-order symbolized by the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrifices has come to an end and that Jesus’ resurrection inaugurates a new creation and a new Temple, the Risen Christ himself. When Jesus said to the penitent robber, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23.43), he is not speaking only of the salvation of one particular man: he is speaking of Paradise restored for Israel and for all sinful mankind. In this new Temple which is Christ himself, the way to God’s holy presence has been opened up in a way that was not possible before in the old Temple.

Now some in recent years have concluded that the tearing of the Temple veil and the death of Jesus outside the Holy City mean that for Christians, there is no longer the category of the distinctly “sacred.” But the Letter to the Hebrews says that “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us *through the curtain*, that is, through his flesh” for “we have a great priest over the house of God” (Heb 10.19-21), Jesus Christ himself. So there remains for Christians a *curtain*—that is, a veil, a boundary, a distinction—between the sacred and the profane; this *new curtain of the Holy of Holies is the flesh, the humanity, of Christ himself*, who is “our wisdom, our righteousness and *sanctification and redemption*” (1 Cor 1.30).

Jesus’ death and resurrection, and our life in him, are a *re-consecration* of human nature and of the entire created cosmos; “for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col 1.16). “Through him, God was pleased to... reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1.20). In and through us, the living Temple, all creation is sanctified and brought back to God. Thus St. Paul writes to Timothy that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tm 4.4-5).

At the offertory, the bread and wine—“fruit of the earth” and “fruit of the vine” upon which human hands have labored—are brought forward and offered for consecration in the sacrifice. In the Eucharistic sacrifice itself, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into Christ’s Body and Blood, is the foretaste of the final transformation of the entire material universe in the glorified humanity of Christ. St. Paul tells us that all creation, and we ourselves, groan in travail until this process of sanctification is at last consummated (Rom 8.22-23). In Christ and his sacraments, we have a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth, in which the only Temple is “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21.22).

You see, for a Christian, consecration—the truly sacred—is not about irrational taboos, or prudish attitudes, or keeping our faith locked up in the sacristy, or confining our Christianity to a ghetto labeled “religion.” Consecration is about the encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ, and with his redeeming power that transforms and renews all things (Rev 21.5).