



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 5, 2009

Palm Sunday

Solemn Evensong

at 4pm

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

on

Matthew 21:12-17

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THAT CLEANSED-OUT PLACE IN THE HEART OF THE TEMPLE

May I take you back, please, to a moment in this evening's gospel reading. We have seen Jesus angry, with vigor driving out the sellers and the buyers within the temple and throwing over the money-changers' tables. His intention is to make the temple what the prophesies of old had called it: a house of prayer. He will reclaim the temple from thieves and thievery and purify it for God's purposes.

All the sources know Jesus did this angry and righteous and quite frighteningly holy act, even if they can't agree on the time of its happening. John puts it almost at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, whereas Mark puts it on the day after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrated this morning. If we used anachronistic shorthand and said that Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly on "Palm Sunday," then Mark says he cleansed the temple on "Holy Monday," and John says he did it a couple of years ago.

Matthew, however, says he did it today, on the same day that he was greeted with palms and hosannas by the crowds. For Matthew, the cleansing of the temple is the climax of Palm Sunday. And why is that? Here is the moment I'd like you to remember. Immediately after Jesus drove the buyers and sellers out, Matthew says, "the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them." And that's not all. "The children [were] crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'" Right in the middle of the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, on the same day that the crowds acclaimed him on the road, the blind and the lame and children came to him in the temple.

The blind and the lame and the little people are the folks who came to Jesus throughout his ministry. He healed them and he welcomed them. Let us remember that Matthew's is the gospel of mercy. Matthew, as a despised tax collector, knew personally what it means to be shunned and hated, and he knew from Jesus what it means to receive mercy. So Matthew teaches us all those great stories of mercy, from Joseph at the beginning having mercy on Mary before he understands the meaning and the origin of her pregnancy, to many parables of rich people and powerful people who showed mercy (or who didn't), to the great parable of the final judgment, when people who have fed the hungry and visited the sick and done other acts of mercy are told, to their surprise, that every kind act ever done is an act done to Jesus.

Now here it is, right in the temple itself: mercy, in the persons of the blind and the lame, being healed by Jesus, and the young people, having been welcomed to Jesus, singing his praise. Mercy has set up shop in the heart of the temple. Which is of course where mercy belongs.

All this is for us a (sort of) picture of Jesus himself. Destroy this temple, Jesus said, and in three days I will raise it up. And he was destroyed, killed in a most brutal way, but then raised to new life on the third day. That Jesus who we see on the cross, who was buried in the tomb, who slept in death and who rose to new life, he *is* the temple: in his heart he carries the blind and the lame, and all the little people, and everyone who joins the crowd saying hosanna. And all the people who have ever longed for mercy, he has a place cleared for them in his heart—a place for you—a place of mercy and healing and joy and song. I suppose that the question for us as we embark upon this Holy Week is: Will we come to that cleansed out place in the heart of the temple, will we draw closer to the place Jesus has prepared for us?