

The Third Sunday of the Great Fast

Colossians 2 : 16 – finish; James 2 : 14 – finish; Acts 10 : 1 – 9;

Psalm 68, 9, 10; John 2 : 12 - finish

To appreciate the inspiration prompting our Fathers to have appointed certain scriptures for each Sunday of the Great Fast, in each case, it is best to try finding a common theme. Often, the theme may be gleaned from the mesbak, because it introduces the Gospel reading. However, for the 3rd Sunday of the Great Fast, theme searchers may find a surprise. While the Psalm verses give a clue about the whole lesson, a more insightful statement of the common theme is the last line of the Gospel passage. Quite simply, the Evangelist St. Matthew observes, “for He (Jesus) knew what was in man.” Considering all the contemporary commotion about rules, and popular pieties appropriate to this season, obviously, too many people show that they miss the point of the whole fast. The main point of the Great Fast, just like the feast for which it should prepare us, is that we learn to follow Jesus Christ. Only He both knows us as we really are, and offers the method to empower us to change.

On this Sunday of the Fast we commemorate one of Christ’s most passionate moments. When He entered the temple at Jerusalem and drove out the merchants, He displayed anger, in a way that is unparalleled in the Bible. Was He out of control? Many who saw it, apparently, thought so: they ran. But, we should ask ourselves, “How angry was He?” “Why did He get that angry?” And, “What should we make of it?” Jesus was very angry_ angry enough to get physical with people whom He cited for abusing the preeminent place of worship among His contemporaries. Most of the offenders would probably have defended their behavior as, “just trying to make a living, by providing a convenience to worshippers.” Yet He could see through this. Jesus could see that what they were doing was gradually bringing commercialization to the entrance of the temple. Nobody had complained because most were happy to be afforded some convenience in worship.

Meanwhile, some of their contemporaries were so scandalized by the whole temple scene that they refused to participate in the temple rites. We know, from mid-20th century archaeology, that some Jews in Jesus’ day fled to a desert stretch near the Dead Sea, in order to find a better way to worship, according to their preferences. There is no Gospel narrative of Jesus ever addressing the Essenes.

Today, in the Ethiopian Diaspora, it is not unusual to hear debates about using this or that instrument to support choirs that cannot sing over the stray noise of inattentive congregations. It is common to find benches or chairs with cushions for most of the people to sit, like spectators, during the services. Then, there is a matter of needing carpets because we take off our shoes. Even with state of the art central air conditioners_ people often complain that the temperature is not just right. Even with cushions on the pews, I’ve seen people dragging their own personal pillows into the church. In some

places parish councils have to put up “donation boxes” to remind people of their duty to support the church. Where do you think Christ would begin to try to straighten out our ideas about worship? If we do not use this season of the Great Fast to get off our comfort and entertainment kick and get our priorities about worship straight, I would imagine that He will, when He returns, use more than a knotted cord to put us in our place.

But rather than going to those who were struggling to purify their worship, Christ came to the Temple, correcting those who were busy corrupting it, “for He knew what was in man.” He came to earth to become one of us, knowing what sinners we are, but loving us anyway. Whenever we honestly make up our minds to begin to follow Him, we must discover real zeal for His house, considering any inconvenience or discomfort as a blessing. Whenever we begin to recognize what we have really become, we will begin to come to church, not to be entertained, but to bring our silent sacrificial offering of money and good works to put with the saving commemoration of Christ’s perfect sacrifice. If we settle for anything less than the real thing: the qidase, as worship in spirit and truth, aren’t we lying? We should come on time to hear all the prayers, we should find out what the prayers mean, and take it all to heart_ make it part of our lives. We should pray, fast, and repent of our sins, so that we may fully participate in the qidase. If grown-up Ethiopians do not begin regularly partaking of the qurban, in a responsible way, our children will get the idea that it is only for kids. What does that say about faith? What faith do our works support? Is what we show, true faith?

Because Jesus Christ knows what is in us, He knows what we lack, He knows what we need. He offers us what we need to change. We are still free to decide whether or not to accept His offer. But in the end, each of us will have to answer for answers which we are currently giving. Are we just pretending to be humble? Are we talking about His covenant while casting God’s words behind us? Are we just pretending to be humble and wise by talking of fasting? To straighten out our priorities of belief, we need to work on knowing, accepting, and using the power which is in Christ, to change our behavior to match His. To start with we must get angry enough with the state in which we find ourselves, to begin to drive out all the parasitic thoughts which distract us, then use military strength self-discipline to take up our cross, and follow Christ.

Abba Thomas, March, 2005