

07 March 2021

Writings: Starting Over

Jesus said, "Take these things out of here. Stop making my Father's house into a marketplace" (John 2:16).

Some time ago I was working on a Sunday Sermon. When I first started, I had this great story I wanted to use in it. I had found some important information about the text in a Scripture Commentary I wanted to include. I had some ideas about how I could help people apply the message of Scripture passage to their daily lives. After working on it for a couple of hours the Sermon consisted of a full page of material. However, when I read over the Sermon, the story, information and the application parts were all disconnected. I had three Sermons each with a different message. Reluctantly, I realized I would have to delete what I had written and start over. After more work, I was able to produce a Sermon which was not perfect, but at least better connected. My experience taught me sometimes starting over is the only way to move forward.

In today's Gospel, Jesus has a confrontation with some people in the Jerusalem Temple designed to make them realize they had to start over if they wanted to stay connected to God.

The Jerusalem Temple was in many ways the social and religious center of Jewish life in Israel. It was where people went to pray. It was where Rabbis often taught their students about the Jewish faith. It was where people went to offer sacrifices to God as part of their religious duty. Outside the main part of the Temple was a courtyard where vendors sold animals which were officially approved for use in ritual sacrifice. Jewish Law placed certain requirements on animals offered in sacrifice regarding their age and condition. Roman currency had an image of the Emperor on it and since he regarded himself as a god the coins could not be used to make monetary offerings in the Temple. Moneychangers were present in the courtyard to exchange the coins. Since the vendors and moneychangers were there to make a profit, these individuals were often viewed as corrupt. Clearly, they were distracting people from the purpose of the Temple which was to connect people with God.

This distraction was likely part of the reason Jesus was incensed by these activities. They had disconnected people from God. However, he also came to earth to teach people the old way of connecting with God through animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple was being replaced by another: himself. His teachings and miracles ("signs" in John's Gospel) revealed how Jesus was not just God's messenger (as was Moses) but the message itself. His Death would be the sacrifice which redeemed people from Sin once and for all. His Resurrection would demonstrate his power over death and signal how their connection with God had entered a new stage. His presence meant the Temple, which had existed for centuries, was no longer needed. It would be through belief in him that the connection would be maintained. For many people, this would require them to start over in how they thought and related to God.

During this Covid 19 pandemic, many people have experienced a sense of disconnection in their lives. Restrictions intended to prevent the spread of the virus have meant many family celebrations are done virtually. Zoom meetings have gone from being used periodically to the normal way of doing business for most companies and organizations. During the lockdown, many Parishes have livestreamed Mass, Stations of the Cross and other Spiritual Devotions. At Holy Rosary, we have recorded a weekly Video Sunday Liturgy for both adults and children to help people feel connected to their parish. Technology has certainly helped people feel connected in their professional, personal and spiritual lives. Yet, I often wonder what will happen after the pandemic is over. Will people want to stay home in their pyjamas and watch Mass on their laptop rather than come to Church?

Catholicism is a Sacramental Faith which requires a physical presence. Reception of the Eucharist requires you to be in the building. You can't be absolved from your sins virtually. The sick have to be present to be anointed. While it may be inconvenient, perhaps that is the point. Jesus came to earth to be physically present to us. He used material objects like bread, fish and saliva in his ministry to teach

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people about God. The blood which came from his side on the cross proved he was no human looking spirit. Jesus wanted us to understand that connection with God happens on the physical as well as social and spiritual levels. The Sacraments are intended, among other things, to remind us of this truth.

When this pandemic ends, many people will seek to reconnect with the important people and things in their lives. Yet, things will be different after Covid 19. In some ways, they will have to start over. For Catholics, part of this process may involve having a better appreciation of the role of physical presence in their faith.

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