

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

The angel brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water flowing out from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the façade of the temple was toward the east; the water flowed down from the southern side of the temple, south of the altar. He led me outside by the north gate, and around to the outer gate facing the east, where I saw water trickling from the southern side. He said to me, "This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah, and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh. Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh. Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9

The waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High!

God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Therefore, we fear not, though the earth be shaken and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea.

The waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High!

There is a stream whose runlets gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High. God is in its midst; it shall not be disturbed; God will help it at the break of dawn.

The waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High!

The LORD of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob. Come! behold the deeds of the LORD, the astounding things he has wrought on earth.

The waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High!

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters: You are God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 2:13-22

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there. He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to

those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace." His disciples recalled the words of Scripture, *Zeal for your house will consume me*. At this the Jews answered and said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his Body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

Ah, the mysteries of the Catholic Church, not the divine ones either but of history, politics and property values; this is a bit of ecclesiastical trivia that is necessary to set some context of history and ancient traditions. The Lateran is the oldest Basilica in the western Church. What's a basilica? Today it is an honorific title given to a particular church. In Roman times, it was a style of architecture. This is how Merriam Webster defines it; an oblong building ending in a semicircular apse used in ancient Rome especially for a court of justice and place of public assembly. It was established in the 320s CE and the present building is not the first one erected on that spot. The current one was built in the 1600s and its current façade was installed in the 1700s. It is also in Rome and not Vatican City. It is the Cathedral of Rome and the Bishop's seat. The bishop's seat is the bishop's throne. The pope is Rome's bishop.

It was built before the Church claimed the Hill of the Vatican. It did so in the 800s. The first Lateran was built during the time of the Roman Empire. The Church claimed the Hill of the Vatican in the 800s as the world began to brighten a bit after the so-called Dark Ages. The Vatican is one of the famous Seven Hills of Rome. On one of its slopes is an ancient, Roman cemetery. On its acme, tradition tells us, St. Peter was martyred and then buried. By the time of its acquisition, the Imperium had disappeared hundreds of years before, leaving the papacy as the sole secular and religious authority. By this time the papacy had adopted all the grandeur, pomp and circumstance of the former Roman Empire. There are some fine articles on Google regarding these topics for more information.

I prefer to focus on the nature of the Church rather than its temporal holdings. There's a big difference between church property and the Church of Jesus. The buildings are empty when the people of God don't gather in them. Today, we talk about a parish or diocesan church as God's house. The problem with that is that God isn't a property owner. The place of our almighty, infinite, eternal and unconditional God is not under lock and key in a little gilt box but the cosmos itself and in the lives of all God's people. This is a tradition that we have inherited from our Jewish roots. The parish Church has taken on the identity of the Temple of Jerusalem; the house and throne of God.

During Jesus' time there was a Temple of Jerusalem. Also, in Jesus time, something new existed for places of worship; the synagogue. Synagogue means meeting place. God's people gathered in them for worship. This is a better way for us to think about a parish church; not God's home but the peoples' home – the people being Christ's true Church. A diocesan cathedral is merely the place where the people of the whole diocese gather. The Lateran Basilica is the place where the entire church may gather. It is the gathering of Jesus' Church that is most important, not the location or building.

This is important for all of us to consider and incorporate into our identity as Christ's Church as we proceed with the diocesan program, "Renew My Church." We close on real estate but expand the identity of the People of God. We will bring our gifts as a parish community to a new community. Members of other communities of faith will gather together with us bringing their gifts. We will all gather together with them to become Jesus body and blood. We are living stones that build the Church. Jesus promised, "When two or three gather in my name, I am there in their midst." Jesus, not the name of any parish, is the bond of our unity. The place? It is where we will gather and know Jesus in the breaking of bread; together in Christ.

There is scripture for this feast too. The prophet Ezekiel wrote during the time of captivity and Diaspora. Jerusalem, the temple and the nations of Israel and Judah were destroyed. Most of their citizens were carried off into exile and slavery. His main theme, briefly, was the restoration of the people of God. Perhaps they may return to the Promised Land, perhaps not. God would accomplish the restoration. Exactly how and when this would happen was unclear. His prophesy has dreamlike almost surreal quality. The imagery is poetic and the movements of it are symbolic because he didn't know where and when God would act. He spoke of abundance; water, fish, fruits and medicine would abound. For whom? For God's people! He tried to provide hope. Water flowed in a desert. Fish and fruit were food in a wilderness. Medicine could heal people and their broken hearts.

However, only a remnant would return to the Promised Land. The rest remained and remain still in Diaspora. People set their roots and raised their families in the land in which they were dispersed. Ezekiel himself never returned either to Jerusalem where he was born. He died in Babylon. What, then, was the Promised Land? Was it merely a place destroyed whose people were scattered? Was the abundance of water, fish, fruit and medicine an illusion or the discovery that God did not live in a specific place? I think the latter.

Ezekiel has told us that he has discovered God's home with God's people where they now lived. His prophetic vision came from within him from the place where God lived; in his very being. The river Arabah is a river in Palestine. Ezekiel had a vision of God's presence as the source of life. God lived where God's people now lived, where Ezekiel had had vision. His hope was not just the restoration of a place and temple. It was the restoration, healing and lives of God's people, wherever they lived, that was God's concern. The places were gone, but God's people remained.

Paul used the images of building and temple to describe Jesus' Church. What is the temple that Christ built? Paul stated plainly, you are the temple of God. Is "you" singular or plural? Can it be both? This is not an edifice that Paul described. It has no exact location. The building being built is Christ's Church comprised of living people alive and gathered in Christ. In Paul's day, the Church, that is the believers in Jesus, still gathered together not in a basilica, church or cathedral but in people's homes. The place was not important; the people's gathering was. What God builds is a living, breathing and growing Church.

Jesus threw the money changers and vendors out of the temple. Or did he? I've traveled extensively in northern New Mexico. There are shrines and chapels all around. Since many people come to visit these places, tourists and pilgrims, the locals have discovered that they can make some money by selling food, trinkets and rosaries to them. One of the most popular is in the town of Chimayo. El Santuario is the church of the town. People come there because it is beautiful and has the reputation of being the Lourdes of the Southwest. Many healings are reported to have happened there. Not far from it is one of my all-time favorite New Mexican restaurants. Off the street, on the way to and from El Santuario are many gift shops. This is the

scenario the Jesus faced. These services were near the temple, not in it. Jesus' actions took place outside of the temple, in the street.

Why were they there in the first place? Money changers were necessary because the temple could not accept money that was not temple money. Look at the change in your pocket. What is stamped into them? People's faces on the heads side and American symbols on the tails side. The temple coins could not have any image or symbol on them. The temple would not accept any pagan money. That would violate the first commandment. Once when I visited St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, there was a table just inside the vestibule near the center aisle entrance. People from all over the world would visit the place. Apparently some of these international visitors would try to put foreign coins into the votive candle slots in offering. Foreign coins are not legal tender and unacceptable when taken to the bank. I am sure the changers provided an important service to the international pilgrims as they helped keep the coinage legal tender.

The temple, as opposed to St. Pat's Cathedral, was not just a place of pilgrimage or for tourists. People came there to make offerings for their sins. They offered animals to be killed. The price for their sins was blood, animal blood. People either brought the animals or bought them in Jerusalem. One offered the life of an animal for their own lives. For us as Christians, we believe that Jesus offered his blood for our lives. The death of one led to the life of another. Our tradition is based on the ancient Jewish tradition. The difference for us is critical to note. God chose to die for us. Jesus offered himself as a willing victim once and for all.

Money was also important for financing the temple. Finances are still a necessity. Someone has to pay bills. Staffs, utilities and upkeep requires income. There is a business side to every place of worship. Jesus knew this so why was his reaction so strong and violent? Jesus' mission was not for the temple as God's house. Jesus, in the gospel of John was the pre-existent and eternal Word that God spoke. God doesn't speak to buildings. God speaks to people. We hear God's Word and through it God saves us. Jesus' mission was to die on the cross to save the entire human race. We are all sinners who need and seek God's forgiveness of our sins. His zeal was for us.

When Jesus spoke of destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days, does it sound familiar? We already know the story as it unfolds from this event to the cross, to Easter and to Pentecost. John also acknowledged that no one at the time had any idea of the significance of Jesus' actions and prophesy. After Pentecost the believers were able to put this in the perspective of faith. Jesus cleansed sinners of sin. Jesus rose from the dead to give believers the promise of eternal life.

When we celebrate the founding of a basilica, we may never visit it. I've never visited Rome and doubt that I ever will. What we remember is not the place, but the people who gather within it. Do you remember the kids' old game? This is the church; here is its steeple. Open the doors and there are the people. Every church is just an empty building when it's not being used. Even though we reserve the Eucharist which is Jesus' body and blood, Jesus always leaves mass with us as we go out, back into the waiting world.

May the Holy Spirit send us forth in service.

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