

## Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 4, 2018

### Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Exodus 20:1–17; Psalm 19:7–14; Romans 7:13–25; John 2:13–22*

In John’s gospel Jesus never performs an exorcism, never heals by casting out Satan.<sup>1</sup> In John, Jesus never responds to requests to perform miracles so that people will believe.<sup>2</sup> John the evangelist—the narrator—speaks of the “signs” Jesus performed; Jesus himself in John only speaks of his “works.”<sup>3</sup> And in John there is only one work that matters. Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”<sup>4</sup> The late British New Testament Professor C.K. Barrett wrote, “The works [of Jesus] make visible both the character and the power of God”<sup>5</sup>—and I would add, God and Jesus being One.

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem only once—in Luke, he goes as a twelve-year-old and then once as an adult. In John, if I have counted

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), 1:526.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:29.

<sup>5</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955), 63.

correctly, Jesus goes to Jerusalem five different times.<sup>6</sup> And every time he goes, he will be doing the work of his Father so that people may believe that he and the Father are One. In remarking on the difference between John and the other gospels, Professor Barrett thought that it was beside the point to try to work out the differences. John the evangelist's interest is "primarily theological."<sup>7</sup> In John, chronology is secondary to theology.

My favorite New Testament blogger, Dr. Mark Davis, who is senior pastor of St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, calls his post on today's gospel text, "Liberating the Temple."<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the passage, it's not clear why Jesus went to the temple—to clean it up or to pray? After Jesus' resurrection, the evangelist tells us, that his disciples will understand that God's Spirit no longer dwells in a place, but in all who believe in the One whom God sent.

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<sup>6</sup> John 2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22; 12:12.

<sup>7</sup> Barrett, 14.

<sup>8</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/03/liberating-temple.html>, (accessed 27 February 2018).

I'm not sure I understand the lectionary's pairing of the Ten Commandments with today's gospel. John's Jesus only asks, "Do you believe?" There's no story in John, like the man in Mark (and in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke), who asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"<sup>9</sup>

Most Protestant Christians know John 3:16 by heart, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." I think it's more important for Christians to know the very next verse, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."<sup>10</sup>

I wonder if Jesus would have been so upset by finding merchants in the temple precincts if the commandments were being followed in spirit and in truth. The changing of coins made it possible for people to exchange Roman money, which carried the image of the emperor, for other money, which did

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:17; Matthew 19:16; Luke 18:18.

<sup>10</sup> John 3:17.

not—no graven images, even on coins, were allowed in the temple.<sup>11</sup>

The selling of animals made it possible for people without animals to offer sacrifice; the selling of pigeons made it possible for those with very little money to offer sacrifice as well. What Jesus did not find in Jerusalem was “zeal for [God’s] house.”<sup>12</sup> He did not find a people who could hear and believe God was present and dwelling among them. Instead he found people who wanted to put God to the test. Jesus didn’t play then, and he doesn’t play the test game today.

I was on a plane last week to Las Vegas—it was vacation, and it didn’t seem like Lent at all there—I enjoyed myself without any gambling—I’d never been before, and it is truly another world. One of the movie choices on the plane going and returning was the 2015 film *Spotlight*. I saw the movie when it came out. You may remember that it wasn’t really about the sexual abuse Roman Catholic clergy had inflicted on far too many young people, but about the enormous

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), I:115.

<sup>12</sup> John 2:17.

challenges faced by the reporters who were trying to get the story out.

Their own editors, the police, and the city's political leaders, not to mention the cardinal archbishop of Boston and his associates, all worked to keep the story of the abuse secret. The movie again doesn't really go into the crimes themselves in any detail at all; it was about the efforts that so many made to try to keep the truth of what had happened from setting people free. Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?"<sup>13</sup> It's a question each of us can answer by believing in the Word made flesh.

Scholars widely believe John was the last of the four gospels written, but it is also possible, scholars admit, that John was written at the same time Matthew and Luke were written<sup>14</sup>—a matter that need not detain us. That said, John represents a distinctive theological reflection on who Jesus was, who Jesus is, and how Jesus is present in time.

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<sup>13</sup> John 18:38.

<sup>14</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 172, 226, 334.

It's John's gospel that begins with the proclamation, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—and the Word was Jesus. It's in John that on the second Sunday of the resurrection, Thomas finally encounters the Risen Jesus and recognizes him as "Lord" and "God."<sup>15</sup> Jesus responded, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."<sup>16</sup>

The mystery of how God's Word finds a home in our minds and our bodies is part of the mystery of creation. It's in Luke's gospel that Jesus asks, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"<sup>17</sup> Then Jesus tells the parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people—he more than follows the rules. You remember the tax collector will not lift up his eyes to heaven to pray. He beats his breast and says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John 20:28.

<sup>16</sup> John 20:29.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 18:8.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 18:13.

The gospel invites us to truth about who we are and to humility in living in the world God has created. The Good News invites us to be confident of God's truth and God's presence in our lives—and to be confident of the truth of life in the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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