

Historic Commentary

(Third Sunday in Lent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on [John 2:13-22](#) from Selected Church Fathers and Reformers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 2](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Augustine:](#) Nevertheless, in order to seek the mystery of the deed in the figurative meaning, who are they who sell the oxen? Who are they who sell the sheep and doves? They are those who seek their own interests in the church rather than those of Jesus Christ. Those who have no desire for redemption have everything for sale. They do not want to be bought; they want to sell. Yet surely it is for their good that they be redeemed by the blood of Christ so that they may attain the peace of Christ. For what profit is there in acquiring anything temporal or transitory in this world—whether it be money, or gorging oneself on food or achieving high honors from your fellow human beings? Are not all things smoke and wind? Do not all things pass on in a moment? And woe to those who want to hang on to passing things, for they pass with them!...

[Chrysostom:](#) But why did Christ use such violence? He was about to heal on the sabbath day and to do many things that appeared to them transgressions of the law. However, so that he might not appear to be acting as a rival to God and an opponent of his Father, he takes occasion to correct any such suspicion of theirs.... He did not merely “cast them out” but also “overturned the tables” and “poured out the money,” so that they could see how someone who threw himself into such danger for the good order of the house could never despise his master. If he had acted out of hypocrisy, he would have only advised them, but to place himself in such danger was very daring. It was no small thing to offer himself to the anger of so many market people or to excite against himself a most brutal mob of petty dealers by his reproaches and the disruption he caused. This was not, in other words, the action of a pretender but of one choosing to suffer everything for the order of the house. For the same reason, to show his agreement with the Father, he did not say “the holy house” but “my Father’s house.” See how he even calls him “Father,” and they are not angry with him. They thought he spoke in a more general way, but when he went on and spoke more plainly of his equality, this is when they become angry

[Irenaeus:](#) He says that this handiwork is “the temple of God,” thus declaring, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that

temple.” Here he manifestly declares the body to be the temple in which the Spirit dwells. As also the Lord speaks in reference to himself, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He was speaking, however, it is said, of the temple of his body. And not only does he [the apostle] acknowledge our bodies to be a temple, but even to be the temple of Christ.

Augustine: Our Lord’s driving out of the temple people who were seeking their own ends, who came to the temple to buy and sell, is symbolic. For if that temple was a symbol it obviously follows that the body of Christ, the true temple of which the other was an image, has within it some who are buyers and sellers, or in other words, people who are seeking their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ.

But the temple was not destroyed by the people who wanted to turn the house of God into a den of thieves, and neither will those who live evil lives in the Catholic church and do all they can to convert God’s house into a robber’s den succeed in destroying the temple. The time will come when they will be driven out by a whip made of their own sins.

This temple of God, this body of Christ, this assembly of believers, has but one voice and sings the psalms as though it were but one person. If we wish, it is our voice; if we wish, we may listen to the singer with our ears and ourselves sing in our hearts. But if we choose not to do so it will mean that we are like buyers and sellers, preoccupied with our own interests.

He then is eaten up with zeal for God’s house who desires to correct all that he sees wrong there. And if he cannot correct it, he endures and mourns.... Let the zeal for God’s house consume every Christian wherever he or she is a member.... In your house you busy yourself in trying to prevent things going wrong. In the house of God, where salvation is offered, ought you to be indifferent?... Do you have a friend? Admonish him gently; a wife or husband? Admonish them too.... Do what you are able, according to your station.

Chrysostom: But was there a need for a sign before putting a stop to their evil practices and freeing the house of God from such dishonor? Was not the fact that he had such great zeal for the house of God the greatest sign of his virtue?... They did not however remember the prophecy but asked for a sign, at once irritated that their shameful traffic was cut off, while at the same time expecting to prevent him from going further. For this dilemma, they thought, would oblige him either to work miracles or give up his present course of action. But he refuses to give them the sign, as he did on a similar occasion, when he answers them that an evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet—only the answer is more open there than here. He however who even anticipated people’s wishes and gave signs when he was not asked, would not have rejected here a positive request, had he not seen that their minds were wicked and false and their intention was treacherous.... As it was, Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Hilary of Poitiers: By the power to take his soul again and to raise the temple up, he declares himself God and the resurrection his own work: yet he refers all to the authority of his Father’s command. This is not contrary to the meaning of the apostle, when he

proclaims Christ, the “power of God and the wisdom of God,” thus referring all the magnificence of his work to the glory of the Father. For whatever Christ does, the power and the wisdom of God does.... Christ was raised from the dead by the working of God, for he himself worked the works of God the Father with a nature indistinguishable from God’s. And our faith in the resurrection rests on the God who raised Christ from the dead.

Ambrose: It was not the Father who divested himself of the flesh; for not the Father, but, as we read, the Word was made flesh. You see, then, that the Arians, in dividing the Father from the Son, run into danger of saying that the Father endured passion. We, however, can easily show that the words treat of the Son’s action, for the Son himself indeed raised his own body again, as he himself said: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” And he himself quickens us together with his body: “For as the Father raises the dead and quickens them, so also the Son quickens whom he will.” ... He, therefore, who has achieved the work of our resurrection, is plainly pointed out to be truly God.

Augustine: See that he was God, equal with the Father. My brothers, the apostle says, “who raised him from the dead.” About whom is he speaking? About the Father. He says, “He became obedient unto death, even to death on a cross. For this reason, God also has raised him from the dead and has given him the name that is above every name.” The Lord was raised up again and exalted. He raised him up again. Who? The Father, to whom he said in the Psalms, “Raise me up, and I shall requite them.” Therefore the Father raised him up again. Did he [the Son] not raise himself? But what does the Father do without the Word? What does the Father do without his only One? For hear that he also was God: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Did he say, “Destroy the temple which the Father will raise up in three days”? But just as when the Father raises up, the Son, too, raises up; so also when the Son raises up, the Father, too, raises up, because the Son said, “I and the Father are one.”

Heinrich Bullinger: The Lord goes up to Jerusalem to observe the Passover as the Law directed. It was the custom for an enormous number of people from Galilee and Judea to come together in the holy city for three festivals appointed in the Law. They came for ritual observance and for making the sacrifices prescribed by the Law. So the Lord could not have picked a better time than this holy occasion for making himself known to all the people. And there was no better way to teach more surely, completely and concisely who he was and why he had come than to perform this action of driving the sellers and buyers from the temple. The Messiah was the king and priest of God’s people. He had come to save humankind and to reform the true religion of his Father, which at that time was distorted by many foolish traditions and crazy things. But the temple was the workshop of religion. And so it was fitting that he hastens straight to the temple and drives out the sellers and buyers. For it is the duty of a king to liberate his oppressed people. And it is the duty of a priest to cleanse religion when it has been defiled and to build it up when it has collapsed. Here, our most excellent Lord shows himself to be the Messiah of God’s people, who had come to declare God’s glory, to reform his church and to save his people. Moreover, we read: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire,

shall come suddenly to his temple. Behold, he comes, says the Lord of hosts.” That messenger had preceded him, John, the envoy and forerunner of Christ, preparing the way of the Lord by baptism and teaching repentance and remission of sins. What was left now was that he himself, the Lord of the temple, of his church and of all his people, should come to the temple and reveal himself to be that longed-for Messiah.

Martin Luther: Here we clearly see that among these people the holy Scriptures were well known, and that they learned them industriously in the synagogues and schools. They had especially made the Psalms well known to the entire people through reading, preaching and discussing.... We know what kind of people the disciples of our Lord Christ were, not clever people, high priests, Pharisees and teachers of the Law, but poor beggars and fishers, people of low status like Peter, Andrew and Bartholomew. Regardless, they knew the Psalms, had heard them read, sung and preached. They also had learned the holy Scriptures, though they must have learned them through careful listening in order to have memorized them and at this time remembered them. Indeed, we see what a passion and dedication to God’s Word can do when the people are faithfully and industriously taught and when they listen carefully. There must have been pure passion, industry and obedience in these people that they listened so industriously when they sang and read in their schools or churches. For they gathered on the Sabbath to preach, pray and sing, as we do in our churches.

John Calvin: To obtain a general view of the passage, it will be necessary briefly to examine the details in their order. That oxen, and sheep, and doves, were exposed to sale in the temple, and that money-changers were sitting there, was not without a plausible excuse. For they might allege that the merchandise transacted there was not irreligious, but, on the contrary, related to the sacred worship of God, that every person might obtain, without difficulty, what he might offer to the Lord; and, certainly, it was exceedingly convenient for godly persons to find oblations of any sort laid ready to their hand, and in this way to be freed from the trouble of running about in various directions to obtain them. We are apt to wonder, therefore, why Christ was so highly displeased with it. But there are two reasons which deserve our attention. First, as the Priests abused this merchandise for their own gain and avarice, such a mockery of God could not be endured. Secondly, whatever excuse men may plead, as soon as they depart, however slightly, from the command of God, they deserve reproof and need correction. And this is the chief reason why Christ undertook to purify the temple; for he distinctly states that the temple of God is not a place of merchandise

But it may be asked, Why did he not rather begin with doctrine? For it seems to be a disorderly and improper method to apply the hand for correcting faults, before the remedy of doctrine has been applied. But Christ had a different object in view: for the time being now at hand when he would publicly discharge the office assigned to him by the Father, he wished in some way to take possession of the temple, and to give a proof of his divine authority. And that all might be attentive to his doctrine, it was necessary that something new and strange should be done to awaken their sluggish and drowsy minds. Now, the temple was a sanctuary of heavenly doctrine and of true religion. Since he wished to restore purity of doctrine, it was of great importance that he should prove

himself to be the Lord of the temple. Besides, there was no other way in which he could bring back sacrifices and the other exercises of religion to their spiritual design than by removing the abuse of them. What he did at that time was, therefore, a sort of preface to that reformation which the Father had sent him to accomplish. In a word, it was proper that the Jews should be aroused by this example to expect from Christ something that was unusual and out of the ordinary course; and it was also necessary to remind them that the worship of God had been corrupted and perverted, that they might not object to the reformation of those abuses

Vs 13. And the passover of the Jews was at hand; therefore Jesus went up to Jerusalem. There were two reasons why he did so; for since the Son of God became subject to the Law on our account, he intended, by observing with exactness all the precepts of the Law, to present in his own person a pattern of entire subjection and obedience. Again, as he could do more good, when there was a multitude of people, he almost always availed himself of such an occasion. Whenever, therefore, we shall afterwards find it said that Christ came to Jerusalem at the feast, let the reader observe that he did so, first, that along with others he might observe the exercises of religion which God had appointed, and, next, that he might publish his doctrine amidst a larger concourse of people.

My Father's house.

Christ declares himself to be the Son of God, in order to show that he has a right and authority to cleanse the Temple. As Christ here assigns a reason for what he did, if we wish to derive any advantage from it, we must attend chiefly to this sentence. Why, then, does he drive the buyers and sellers out of the Temple? It is that he may bring back to its original purity the worship of God, which had been corrupted by the wickedness of men, and in this way may restore and maintain the holiness of the Temple. Now that temple, we know, was erected, that it might be a shadow of those things the lively image of which is to be found in Christ. That; it might continue to be devoted to God, it was necessary that it should be applied exclusively to spiritual purposes. For this reason he pronounces it to be unlawful that it should be converted into a market-place; for he founds his statement on the command of God, which we ought always to observe. Whatever deceptions Satan may employ, let us know that any departure – however small – from the command of God is wicked. It was a plausible and imposing disguise, that; the worship of God was aided and promoted, when the sacrifices which were to be offered by believers were laid ready to their hand; but as God had appropriated his Temple to different purposes, Christ disregards the objections that might be offered against the order which God had appointed.

The same arguments do not apply, in the present day, to our buildings for public worship; but what is said about the ancient Temple applies properly and strictly to the Church, for it is the heavenly sanctuary of God on earth. We ought always, therefore, to keep before our eyes the majesty of God, which dwells in the Church, that it may not be defiled by any pollutions; and the only way in which its holiness can remain unimpaired is, that nothing shall be admitted into it that is at variance with the word of God.

The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. The meaning is, that the disciples at length came to know, that the zeal for the house of God, with which Christ burned, excited him to drive out of it those profanations. By a figure of speech, in which a part is taken for the whole, David employs the name of the temple to denote the whole worship of God; for the entire verse runs thus: the zeal of thy house hath eaten me up, and the reproaches of them who reproached thee have fallen on me, (Psalm 69:9.)

The second clause corresponds to the first, or rather it is nothing else than a repetition explaining what had been said. The amount of both clauses is, that David's anxiety about maintaining the worship of God was so intense, that he cheerfully laid down his head to receive all the reproaches which wicked men threw against God; and that he burned with such zeal, that this single feeling swallowed up every other. He tells us that he himself had such feelings; but there can be no doubt that he described in his own person what strictly belonged to the Messiah.

Accordingly, the Evangelist says, that this was one of the marks by which the disciples knew that it was Jesus who protected and restored the kingdom of God. Now observe that they followed the guidance of Scripture, in order to form such an opinion concerning Christ as they ought to entertain; and, indeed, no man will ever learn what Christ is, or the object of what he did and suffered, unless he has been taught and guided by Scripture. So far, then, as each of us shall desire to make progress in the knowledge of Christ, it will be necessary that Scripture shall be the subject of our diligent and constant meditation. Nor is it without a good reason that David mentions the house of God, when the divine glory is concerned; for though God is sufficient for himself, and needs not the services of any, yet he wishes that his glory should be displayed in the Church. In this way he gives a remarkable proof of his love towards us, because he unites his glory – as it were, by an indissoluble link – with our salvation.

Now as Paul informs us that, in the example of the head, a general doctrine is presented to the whole body, (Romans 15:3,) let each of us apply to the invitation of Christ, that – so far as lies in our power – we may not permit the temple of God to be in any way polluted. But, at the same time, we must beware lest any man transgress the bounds of his calling. All of us ought to have zeal in common with the Son of God; but all are not at liberty to seize a whip, that we may correct vices with our hands; for we have not received the same power, nor have we been entrusted with the same commission.