

Today I would like to draw for you a mental picture of what Jerusalem looked like at the time of Jesus during the Passover celebration. In those days, the activities at the Temple were the major events of the year—religiously, culturally and economically—for all of Israel, but especially Jerusalem. Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world at Passover. The Roman historian Josephus, who probably knew more about Israel and Judea than any non-Jew in the world, may have been exaggerating a bit when he said that over 250,000 Passover victims—oxen, sheep and doves—were sacrificed during Passover. But certainly the figure ran into many thousands.

The Law required that animals for sacrifice had to be perfect. And since people came from faraway places, it would have been difficult to bring an animal with them, not to mention risking the possibility that their animal might be rejected because it had some imperfection. So the great majority of the people bought their animals for sacrifice in Jerusalem. And with only one place to buy what they needed, they would get no bargains. There was pretty much of a monopoly. It was probably something like the Fulton County fair with people packed together coming and going, moving along with thousands of oxen and sheep, or carrying doves in little wooden bird cages. And the high priestly family was in on this business big time. Josephus described the High Priest Ananias as “the great procurer of money.”

Then on top of all this were the moneychangers. The Law required that people purchase their sacrifice animals with *Jewish* currency. Roman coins were considered idolatrous because they were engraved with pagan inscriptions and images. Since the Jews were under Roman occupation they probably had to use Roman currency in their ordinary lives. But that wouldn't fly in the Temple. So when people came to Jerusalem and they wanted to buy an animal for sacrifice, they had to exchange their foreign currency for Jewish currency. Hence, the moneychangers, who very likely made a living by profiteering in these exchanges.

And aside from all the cheating and dishonesty, there were also those who were getting wealthy in the name of God. Jesus told the Jewish leaders who challenged him for doing what he did: "You have made my Father's house a den of thieves!" Nowhere else in the Scripture do we see Jesus react with such anger and passion. Quite possibly he was angry at seeing how poor people, coming to worship God, were being ripped off.

The gospels give us another reason too for his anger, as they recalled the verse from Psalm 69, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Obviously Jesus considered worship of God much more seriously than most people do. We all know how easy it is to become careless in our reverence and devotion to our Heavenly Father, how sometimes we just go through the motions, or let the words of the prayers go in one ear and out the other. Often God gets put in second place, or even further down on our list of priorities. *It was never that way with Jesus.* His Heavenly Father always took first place with him.

In today's first reading from the Book of Exodus we heard the bestowal of the Commandments. Notice they are not *suggestions or recommendations*. They are spoken by One who speaks with authority. ["I am the Lord your God" should be the first line of each commandment.] And notice also that our *obligations to God* are placed at the top of the list. Is that because God is in need of our worship? Certainly not. It is simply putting things in perspective. If we value our relationship with God, everything else falls into place. When God is forgotten, then we have no anchor, no ground on which to base our morality, no one to whom we are accountable. So we make up our own rules; we make ourselves into our own gods. That is where Adam and Eve failed: they wanted to make themselves equal to God and make their own rules. That is how they lost the happiness God had initially given them.

All those merchants and Jewish pilgrims would have known well the Ten Commandments. The first three go into great detail about respect for God the Father—that there should be no other gods, that God's name should not be taken in vain, and that the Sabbath should be kept holy as a sacred day of rest. They would have known that love and care for one's neighbor would have mattered equally. Yet the commandments were rejected, the Temple was defiled, the poor were ignored and the Messiah in their midst was condemned to death.

We, too, live in a world in which commandments are broken and the sacred is profaned. Right and wrong seem to be blurred at times. In this Lenten season, let us think about some ways in which we can draw deep within ourselves and resolve to "turn over some tables." When should we speak out against injustice? Where can we identify idolatry? And in the privacy of our thoughts, how can we cast out the trivial and make room for the sacred? Let us resolve to begin here with this greatest of all prayers—asking the one we receive for **His** wisdom instead of human wisdom.