

Gospel text

John 2: 13-25

13 As the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 Now he found merchants of oxen, sheep and doves in the religious complex, as well as money changers, seated. 15 Then making a whip of cords, he expelled them all from these buildings, as well as the sheep and the oxen, he scattered the money changers' coins on the ground and overturned their tables, 16 and to the dove merchants he said, "Take away all these things. Don't make my father's place a shopping center". 17 His disciples later remembered that it was found in the Bible: "A passion for the place of your presence will devour me." 18 The Jews replied with these words, "What wonder can you do us to justify what you have just done?" 19 Jesus answered them this, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will erect it again". 20 The Jews said to him immediately, "This temple was under construction for 46 years, and would you be able in 3 days to erect it again?" 21 But Jesus wanted to speak about the temple of his body. 22 So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said and began to believe in what was written in the Bible and in the word he had spoken.

23 As he was in Jerusalem for Easter, during this week of celebration, many put their faith in his person, seeing the actions revealing the presence of God that he was producing. 24 But Jesus himself did not trust them, because he knew them all well 25 and did not need to be taught about human beings; he knew well what is at the bottom of their heart.

Gospel commentary - Homily

The violence of life

September 11, 2001 is the icon of a violent religious passion. Aren't these human bombs justified in this holy crusade against the evil empire, this western culture which attacks head on the millennial precepts of Islamic sharia? It is in this context that I suggest to read again the story of this Sunday when Jesus violently drives out the traders from the temple in Jerusalem.

You will note that it is rare that a story is found at the same time among the four evangelists, if we make exception of the story of his death and his resurrection. Are you not surprised that the first Christians wanted to keep in our memory a Jesus who seems to "loose his head"? And with the evangelist John, the presentation of Jesus' gesture is even more violent than among the others: we note that he makes a whip with cords, he scattered the money of the traders before overturning their counters. And yet, the evangelist never says that these people are brigands or thieves; he just says they are just traders. So what is the problem?

You should know that these traders play an important role in the temple. When the evangelist Luke tells us that, for the circumcision of Jesus, Mary and Joseph offered in sacrifice what prescribed the law, ie turtledoves, where do you think they could have obtained these birds, if not from one of these traders? By attacking these merchants of oxen, sheep and turtledoves, Jesus attacks the whole system which makes it possible to offer sacrifices, he attacks the worship itself of the temple. It is a radical gesture, in addition to having been done with a certain violence.

Why does the evangelist John present such a scene where Jesus seems to attack the heart of the Jewish religion, as a Muslim fundamentalist rejecting Western society could do? We had already received an early response in the previous highly symbolic scene, that of the wedding of Cana: water turned into wine, ie the water of Jewish ritual ablutions replaced by something better, the wine of celebration and joy in the community, brought by Jesus himself. With the scene of vendors chased with the whip, it is now claimed that the temple and all the sacrificial ritual has become totally useless for living the relationship with God, that it is replaced by the new temple which is the very person of Jesus, forever alive after a life where he gave himself up to death.

Very well. But why all this violence? Probably, it is the very violence of life. Just as the child does violence to the mother's womb to go out, and it is with a loud cry that he comes to life, so Jesus wants to break down all these partitions that prevent the loving relationship with the one he calls: Father. The disciples find the key to the attitude of Jesus in psalm 69: "The zeal of your house will devour me" which can be translated both by "the love that gives itself completely inhabits me" and "the love that gives itself will eventually cause my death." Because temple worship not only does not achieve this vital relationship with God, it also hinders it. You and I reacted in the same way in our desire for authentic life and in front of everything that hinders true love. The intensity of love triggers the intensity of violence.

What difference is there then between the attitude of Jesus and fundamentalists of all kinds, Muslim or Christian? On the one hand, fundamentalism is the rejection of all newness brought by the present with its new experiences and knowledge, it is the confinement in the status quo and the belief that salvation consists in returning to the past and to solutions of old. In fundamentalism there is a basic lack of faith and a rejection of the dynamism of life. On the other hand, this attitude generates bitterness and hatred towards the current situation which is transformed into ideology and destructive violence. In contrast, it is the need for this loving relationship with a Father God and for the life it generates that pushes Jesus to break out these fossilized rites of temple worship and to propose himself, through his body offered as a gift, as the new place of a relationship to God. The only violence present is that of love that builds, which Easter means.

I pray that we find the same loving and constructive violence in Christians today as we are, sometimes too entangled in the rituals of worship.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, December 2005