

“Angry Jesus”
Homily of March 19, 2006
by Fr. Brian Joyce

I love this gospel scene because it is a great antidote for holy pictures of Jesus. Remember the holy pictures of Jesus many saw as we were growing up. I’ve seen some in the last few days. And what they have in common is Jesus is usually very white, usually a pale white. Some of the times he even has blue eyes. But always, he looks as if he just got a perm and is coming out of the beauty salon. At the very least, we would call the look of him as effeminate. Governor Schwarznegger would call him a “Girlie Man.” And yet, this scene shows us the real Jesus. He makes a cord of whips. He spills the coins of the moneychangers. He overturns their tables in the temple area. The one who comes with the message “Blessed are the meek” and “Walk and extra mile” and “Turn the other cheek” and “Give your shirt away” and “Love your enemies,” the man who does that, is rugged enough to take on the temple police and its security guards, rugged enough to rage and lose his temper to make a point about justice, about religion, about worship, and about himself.

Now other prophets had denounced religious commercialism and they had denounced the notion of God trapped by or tamed by our religious observance and our crass legalism, prophets like Jeremiah and Zachariah and Malachy. But Jesus was the first one to add his actual muscle to his preaching and his words. You see, the temple area, and that’s what we are talking about, not a building but the area.... It would be like Golden Gate Park. Remember, Jesus is chasing out oxen, and sheep and doves. What if they were all in here? Wouldn’t that be a little bit of a mess? It was the whole temple area where people had to come as pilgrims to this holy place, and needed to use money. But the temple area, like most of Palestine, was under occupation from the Roman authorities and Roman coins were the ones being used in business everywhere. But it was forbidden by Jewish law to use Roman coins in the temple area. So, if you came as a pilgrim, you had to go to the moneychangers and get your Roman coins changed for Jewish money. And they could charge up to a half a shekel fee for the exchange, which would be two days’ wages. And Jesus takes one look at the fleecing of poor pilgrims with outrageous rates, and he becomes infuriated. The Jesus who stands for and calls us to stand for compassion and justice sees justice and compassion being violated, and he will have none of it. I have to say it reminds me just a little, if you read today’s letter in the bulletin of Cardinal Mahoney who is looking at the law that is being considered in the Senate today, was passed already in the House of Representatives, that says if we reach out and help immigrant poor, if they are illegal aliens, (They come to our door all the time here, five days a week.) if our St. Vincent dePaul Society does not act as immigration officials and interrogate them and report them, we will be sentenced to five years in prison for a felony. And Cardinal Mahoney says, “We’ll have none of that. I’m

telling my priests, my parishoners to ignore it if that law is passed.” I think there’s a similarity there.

But Jesus also points out something, and makes a strong point about himself. You know, the question sometimes comes up “Why is it that from early on, the religious leaders were so eager to arrest Jesus, to have him tried and have him executed?” There were a lot of other preachers, a lot of other prophets at the same time, others claiming to be the Messiah. And they did not go after them quite the same way. The scholars say there are two reasons that triggered this anger and this plotting against Jesus. One goes back to, up in Galilee, on the hillside, he multiplies the loaves and fishes and it gathers thousands upon thousands of people on the hillside who are from different castes, are not supposed to associate with each other, different religious status, sinner and non-sinner, not supposed to deal with one another. He gathers them all together and they are actually feeding one another. And down in the capital they hear about this and the religious authorities say, “This is community organization gone too far. We have to stop this man.”

There is a second reason. And I remember, about five years ago, I preached about the loaves and fishes and said that was one of the triggers leading to Christ’s execution. And there was a Jewish Rabbi at Mass. He came up and said, “You left out the most important trigger.” This is the phrase he used, “Jesus mooned the temple.” He showed contempt for their most holy sight. He said, “I’m going to tear it down and I’m going to replace it. I’m going to throw you out of my father’s house and I’m going to replace it.” So, Jesus is the cause of our joy in this season because he comes as a defender of the poor and because he replaces the temple. He replaces the temple, that sight, calling us to worshipping God in spirit and truth. He replaces it by saying that we are to be the Body of Christ, as a people we are to replace the Body of Christ with his risen spirit and presence, and praise our God. That’s where we worship. And, finally, after millions of years of evolution, we find in Jesus Christ, in this one person, a breakthrough of the presence of God and also a pattern, a paradigm, of what we are supposed to be about. With all creation, we are called to be the temple of God. We are called to be instruments of God’s presence. That’s good news. That’s a source of joy.

I hope you don’t mind. I want to add a personal footnote here. Earlier this week, Thursday and Friday, March 16th and March 17th I celebrated something. On March 16th in 1963, I was ordained a priest and on March 17th (St. Patrick’s Day) I celebrated my first Mass as an ordained priest. It’s been forty-three years. It’s my forty-third anniversary. (A big round of applause from the congregation follows!) ... You didn’t think I ‘d make it this far! People ask me sometimes, “Does it seem that long?” And I have two answers. One answer is, “It seems a lot longer, because for one lifetime, I’ve been involved in so much. I was associate pastor in two parishes. I was a graduate student as a priest. I was director of adult education for the diocese of Oakland. For ten years, I was a Chancellor of the Diocese of Oakland. I was an author, a lecturer, and then, most precious of all, for almost twenty-eight years, I’ve been a pastor. And that seems like a lot. It seems like a long time. And then, at the same time, it seems like almost just yesterday. One, it has gone so quickly. Secondly, I’m still learning. Every day, I’m still learning. And thirdly, I’m continually surprised, day after day. I’m surprised by people. I’m

surprised by you. I'm surprised by my ministry.

C. S. Lewis, who is Father Dibble's favorite author, along with Flannery O'Connor, wrote a great book in the last century, "Surprised by Joy." I feel surprised by joy, by wonderful people like yourselves that I work with, by your participation in your faith and your worship, by your growth and by your generosity, by your support, and by your willingness at times to disagree entirely with me and still be friends, by your willingness to walk with me and to let me walk with you. Who could ask for more? Thank you for the gift of joy. Amen.