

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Mar 22nd 2013

Jerusalem for the feast of the Dedication of the Temple (what we now call Hanukkah). It's a kind of prelude to the ultimate confrontation that we will remember and relive in the Holy Week liturgies. St. Ignatius tells us to use our imaginations, put ourselves into the scene, so as to get a better sense of what is really happening. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book "Prophetic Jesus" helps us to do this.

Imagine, he says, a dedicated small town pastor, deeply committed to God's Kingdom on earth, leading a group of his ordinary parishioners to the Vatican for the Holy Week celebrations. He stops on the steps of St. Peter's in Rome and begins preaching to the many pilgrims gathered in the Holy City for the feast – proclaiming: "Don't pay attention to what's going on here. That's not what God wants. God has indeed given us charge over the world, but this is not the way God wants us to run things."

For Rome, read Jerusalem; for Holy Week, read Passover; for today, read 2000 years ago. Jerusalem in Jesus' time was more than Rome is for us today, as it was the center not only of Jewish belief and practice, but of Roman imperial power in Palestine as well. Herod and Pilate were both in the city at the time of the final confrontation. Imagine the courage it took for Jesus to challenge both the civil and the religious establishments.

We too easily forget what the letter to the Hebrews tells us: Jesus was human like us in all things save sin. He had had to learn His Father's will in the same way we do – by prayer and by trial and error – in this case by going up against those in power. His hope, always, was that they would listen and change. But, failing that, His fate was pretty much sealed. He was a troublemaker. That's what's behind the many gospel passages that say "They sought ways to put Him to death," a sentiment prefigured in today's reading from Jeremiah.

We believe that Jesus' victory was won on the cross, that in his death God is enthroned not just as "King of the Jews" but as King of all the world. But that Kingship must continually be made our own in every generation. As the body of Christ, who lives on in the Church, we have the same Christ-duty to speak prophetically to power. Like Jesus 2000 years ago, we have ample reason today to say: "This is not the way God wants the world to be run . . . Change . . . Repent!"

Jesus gives us the needed courage . . .

Robert P. Heaney