

Sunday Homily

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

7 MARCH 2021

YEAR B

“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple,
and in three days I will raise it up.’”

John 2:19

Illustration

“The difference [sic] from a person and an angel is easy. Most of an angel is in the inside and most of a person is on the outside.”

On a foggy November night in the East End docklands of the 1930s, a young man named Fynn found a neglected five-year-old girl named Anna. Fynn’s profound and moving book, *Mister God, This Is Anna*, charts the course of their friendship over the next couple of years until Anna’s death in an accident at nearly eight years old.

On one level, Anna was like any other five-year-old child: mischievous, energetic and endlessly curious. But on another level she was precociously gifted, with a depth of understanding and insight beyond her own – or anyone else’s – years. In Fynn’s own words: “At five years Anna knew absolutely the purpose of being, knew the meaning of love and was a personal friend and helper of Mister God. At six Anna was a theologian, mathematician, philosopher, poet and gardener.”

Fynn paints a picture of himself as a young, intelligent adult willingly following in the wake of a remarkable child, struggling to keep up with the depth of her insights and perceptions. Anna’s thoughts and words stop us in our tracks because they challenge our limited understanding, and because we instinctively feel that she is offering us a tantalising glimpse into the mind of God, just beyond our sight.

Gospel Teaching

Anna may remind us a little of Jesus at twelve years old, when he stayed behind in Jerusalem after the Passover festival. Baffling his worried parents with talk of needing to be in his Father’s house, and amazing the teachers in the Temple with the level of his understanding, Jesus spoke with an authority that commanded the respect of his hearers.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus is back in the Temple, lashing out in anger at those who were trading there. This incident appears in all four Gospels: at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry here in John, and associated with the Passion narratives in the Synoptics. A popular interpretation has been to see this as an example of Jesus’ humanity – he got angry just like the rest of us! But in our

eagerness to claim similarity between Jesus and ourselves, we are in danger of missing a far deeper truth. John does not have to “prove” Jesus’ humanity; after all, he has already affirmed that the Word became flesh (1:14). Of far deeper import here is the authority that the fully human Jesus claims for his words and actions.

The traders that Jesus drove out were not gatecrashers into the daily life of the Temple; far from it, they were essential to the whole operation of the Temple cult. Animals and birds were needed for sacrifices, and the money changers were necessary because coins bearing the emperor’s head were not acceptable within the Temple precincts. When the outraged Jews demanded to know by what authority Jesus did these things, he referred cryptically to his future Passion and death: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

This was a revolutionary claim. For the Jewish nation, the Temple was the locus of God’s presence amongst his people, the beating heart of their faith and worship. But by referring to the temple of his body, Jesus was effectively claiming that the cult of the Temple was past: the presence of God upon earth was now embodied, not in a building, but in Christ himself.

Application

The scandal and the challenge continue to this day. A great danger for the Church in any age is that it will fall into the trap of assuming that the Church’s authority is the same thing as God’s authority. When we think of our own Christian community, what are the “sacred cows” – areas that we have closed off, declared non-negotiable, made impervious to the indwelling and renewing action of Christ’s Spirit? The danger is there for all of us, whether we are part of a long-established church community or a new fellowship.

The startling insights of Anna, and the authority-challenging words and actions of Jesus, jolt us, if we allow them, into new ways of seeing God and the ways in which he seeks to draw us more fully into the depths of his love. The scales fall from our eyes, and we see things as if for the first time. The yardstick for all our Christian communities must be the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How open are we prepared to be?