

Ascension

Ascension

June 02, 2019

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

One way to summarize the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus is that he called for the eradication of the cult of purity that surrounded the worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Now the temple was the holiest place in Judea. It was a spacious monumental structure on a mount overlooking crowded streets and small cramped dwellings. Access to the temple precincts was restricted by the priests to those who were ritually clean. This excluded the spiritually defective, both those possessed by evil spirits as well as public sinners such as tax collectors and prostitutes. It excluded the physically defective, the crippled and the blind. It excluded the sick, especially those chronically ill such as lepers. It excluded the socially defective such as beggars and Samaritans. And it excluded women, during menstruation.

Its no coincidence that these were the very people that Jesus reached out to. His intention was to gather together a collection of the Chosen People that ran counter to the purity ideal of the temple priests--a gathering of the defective, the sick, the poor, the outcast, the sinner--those most in need of God's mercy, those only too keenly aware of their utter dependence upon the grace of God.

For Jesus' problem with the temple priest's rhetoric of purity was that it tended to confuse God's will with their own power and prestige. The priests alone were pure enough to enter the holy of holies. The priests alone were able to mediate between God and his people. The priests alone set the rules for who was clean and welcome into the temple precincts and who was unclean, unwelcome, bared from setting foot in God's own home.

And so Jesus pilloried the purity cult of the temple. He announced the coming of the Kingdom of God precisely through healing the sick, exorcizing the possessed, liberating the captive, forgiving the sinner. He cured lepers and then had them go to the priests and force them to pronounce that they were now clean. He healed on the Sabbath to show the Pharisees that it is people, not the Law that God cares about. And when he went to Jerusalem, he sought to cleanse the temple itself, throwing out its money-changers who for a fee exchanged profane Roman coins for ritually clean, temple coins to pay for temple sacrifices. He proclaimed in the temple itself for all the pure to hear, that he was going to tear this temple down, stone by stone and rebuild a new temple, a true temple built of people rather than marble, in the space of three days.

It was these last attacks against the temple in the midst of the high holy days of Passover that got Jesus killed. But it was through his death that God raised up in him a new temple, a church, literally, an ekklesia, an assembly of the called, in which all would be welcome, clean and unclean, saint and sinner alike. As we read in the letter to the Hebrews, today Christ does not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, but ascends to heaven himself, that he might now appear before God himself on our behalf. Christ becomes the new high priest, one who does not sprinkle the altar with the blood of sacrificed animals, but with his very own blood, as a ransom for all. Through Christ's blood we are all washed clean. Through Christ's blood we can all enter the sanctuary in which God dwells by the new and living way he has opened before us through the veil that is his very own flesh.

The problem with the logic of purity is that ultimately it excludes us all. For we are all defective in one way or another, we are all unclean at one time or another in thought, word and deed. In fact the logic of purity excludes Jesus as well. Not only did he die a death of defilement and shame, hung from a Roman cross, but he would have grown up a bastard in the eyes of his extended family and gossip neighbors. For Mary had conceived before she and Joseph wed. And while family and neighbors could not read, they could count. An angel was needed to convince Joseph that Jesus was not the child of another man, but of God himself. But angels were not sent to everyone else in town. Jesus would have grown up knowing what it was like to be an outcast.

The response to imperfection ought not be banishment or exclusion, that only leads to denial and deception both by others, and ultimately, by ourselves. It only spawns a desperation that we will be found out and exposed as a far cry from the image we project to others. The response to imperfection ought rather to be recognition, recognition that we are not so very different in our own way from the defects we see only too well in others, and that we would do better to band together rather than to expel each other and seek refuge with those who still profess to be perfect. Christianity is not a religion for the pure but for the sinner. It's a religion for those who know they cannot be perfect through their own efforts but who need grace, and who hunger for salvation.

Our High Priest grew up perceived to be unclean and died the death of the unclean. But God raised him up and now he sits in the place of honor at the right hand of the Father, to intercede us unclean. Jesus had proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. An old Jesuit who served on the Indian missions would refer to it as the Kin-dom of God, a holy family of officially unholy people- sinners and outcasts, poor and sick who cannot save themselves but can only look to Jesus welcome them in.