



Reflection 3rd Week of Lent 3 March 2024 by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“I will give you a new spirit, says the Lord.” (Entrance Antiphon Ezekiel 36 : 26)

“We live in changing times” it is often said in relation to the way we live and how the Church as an institution responds. This week’s Gospel focusing on the cleansing of the Temple gives us an opportunity to reflect on one of these: the way we conduct our Funerals. Around Christmas time you may remember the controversy surrounding the Funeral of an Irish Pop Star, Shane McGowan. The legend in the world of Punk got a rousing send off in the streets and in the Church too: where the clergy looked a bit ill at ease as the Band and Singers gave a rendition of “Fairytale of New York”. The singing led to dancing in the aisles. Johnny Depp the famous film star did a reading and Jerry Adams was prominent – nothing wrong with that of course, Shane who was a spiritual person and a famous Punk Rock Star deserved to be celebrated.

More recently in the famous St Patrick’s Cathedral, New York, there was a Funeral of an Atheist, a self-confessed transgender activist Cecilia Gentili, who famously said: “I don’t believe in God, but God wanted me always, always, the star of the show” – a line coming from her one-woman show, Red Ink. Her family, it is reported, wanted St Patrick’s because “it is an icon just like her”. There were interceptions to the funeral rites, dancing in the main aisle, outfits considered inappropriate, and language held to be disrespectful in a sacred space, considered “America’s Parish Church.” One author Nicholas Sawicki said the issue was not about having the Funeral of a Transgender person: “The LGBTQ Community and the sex workers Gentili advocated for deserve to be ministered to like any other group because they, too, are an integral part of the Church ... No, what caused this travesty was the radical culture of individualism that pervades our society and was made manifest during the funeral. It makes us believe that everything consists in giving free reign to our own ambitions ... they (those organising the funeral) focussed on the “icon” they wished to celebrate while giving little thought, it seems, to the icon they were about to desecrate – the mourners wanted the funeral to be in a Catholic space for non-Catholic reasons – entering the physical Church without entering into the spiritual Church.”

I choose to speak of Funerals rather than selling newspapers or raffle tickets at the back of Church in relation to this Sunday’s Gospel where Jesus drives out the buyers and sellers from the Temple. In one sense they had a right to be there: worship in the Temple included animal sacrifice, and merchants sold animals to worshippers. Money changers exchanged Roman coins, which bore the image of the Roman emperor for the temple coins that were needed to pay the temple tax. But, in his action recorded in today’s Gospel we see a sign of the new worship that is ushered in by the death and resurrection

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of Our Lord. According to Barclay, the Scripture Scholar, this whole temple scene had become “worship without reverence”. Jesus used the occasion to prophesy that this form of worship and these sacrifices would come to an end. In the future, the true worship of God would pass through the temple that is Jesus himself. Pollard, writing in “Finding Fresh Light” says: “Our heart is God’s new house. We cannot let it degenerate as the Jerusalem Temple degenerated.... Lent is the time given to us each year to spring-clean our temple – with a little fasting – a little more focussed prayer, a companionship of Jesus along the stations of his suffering and cross, and a renewed heart through a good confession. ... The liturgical directions that came in the wake of Vatican II called for the refurbishment of our churches, but the Council itself was convened for the renewal of the house of the human heart.”

Returning to the conduct of Funerals in our changing world: I started with recent celebrity Funerals that have shocked many faithful Catholics in the way they have departed from worship of God in Church to the extent that they have become rather the celebration of the individual. I have found this as a Priest responsible for oversight of Funerals a point of tension: one of the good things is that the celebration of a person’s life as evidenced in their love of God and Family and their achievements as responsible members of society, are being celebrated in a way they were not in the past. But, the need of God’s Grace and Forgiveness so that we may enter the fullness of the Life of Christ in His Death and Resurrection remains. It should not be forgotten; we are still on the way to the Banquet of Heaven at our Passing – that is why we pray for the Dead: ***“I will give you a new spirit, says the Lord “***

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