

I heard this past week about a Cathedral in Milan that is worried about the Swine Flu spreading by way of the holy water in the baptismal font – too many hands in the same water. So the Cathedral, not to be outdone by H1NI, installed a holy water dispenser. It is a motion activated holy water dispenser – wave your hand over the sensor and out comes your holy water.

Well, the Cathedral is to be congratulated for its health consciousness. But, the holy water dispenser points to an enduring myth in the church. The problem is that we tend to confuse the symbols of God with God Himself. Or we tend to confuse institutions that are supposed to represent God with God Himself.

Holy water is powerless. At least it's powerless to affect any good. It may spread swine flu, in which case it's beneficial to have a dispenser. But in and of itself, it is just water. And the institution of the church is just a human institution fraught with sin and self-interest. The power for good, or the power for healing is not in holy water, but in a Holy God. And confusing God and the Church will leave you disappointed in every case.

We've got an example of this in today's gospel. Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. The temple is the quintessential symbol of God. The temple is the Institution above all Institutions. In the passage, Jesus and the disciples are leaving the temple and the disciples gush over the building. "*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.*" They sound like U-Guides on the Lawn. But, Jesus responds to this reverence and awe for the temple by saying, "*Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon stone that will not be thrown down.*"

Do you realize how crazy that must of sounded? What a thing for Jesus to say! Here's some background on the temple so you know how jarring Jesus' response is to the disciples.

The temple was considered one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. It took 46 years to build - a mountain of white marble decorated with gold. The façade was spectacular. It had wall upon wall upon court upon court even before you came to the sanctuary. The temple took up 1/6 of the city of old Jerusalem. The rabbis of the day had a saying - "*he who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life.*"

That's just the architecture. If it were just a monument to human achievement and ingenuity then maybe Jesus' prediction of its destruction wouldn't be so radical. But of course for the Jews the temple was so much more. The temple was where God lived! It is where his Shekinah Glory resided. It's the ultimate in sacred space. It was not just where people gathered to worship, it was where God himself lived. It was God's house.

This is what Jesus said when he was 12 and his family made a trip to the temple from Nazareth and Jesus got left behind. After 3 days they realized he was missing and went

back and found him in the temple. Mary said, *“Son, why have you treated us so? Your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.”* Jesus answered, *“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”*

At the very heart of his Father’s house, behind the curtain inside the temple, was the bulls-eye of God’s presence – the holy of holies. You had to be a special priest from a special family just to go in there. And as Dave said last week, you had to have a rope tied around your ankle in case you were struck dead by the glory of God’s presence, so others could pull you out without having to go in to face the same fate.

The temple was the identity of the Jewish people – their religion, society, culture and family. So when Jesus predicts its destruction it must have been extremely alarming. And the description of the destruction is total. His use of double negative tells us that. Not one stone will be left upon another. The prophet Haggai used that exact language in the rebuilding of the temple 500 years earlier – building stone upon stone.

Jesus predicts the total undoing, the total destruction of His Father’s House. And in fact, this is exactly what happened 40 years later. In 70 AD the Romans completely destroyed the temple, leaving not one stone upon another. If the temple was God’s house, God was left homeless.

You would think that Jesus the Son of God would see the destruction of his Father’s house as a bad thing. But he doesn’t. In fact, the destruction of the temple is consistent with the rest of Jesus’ life and ministry. Predicting the literal deconstruction of the Temple, Jesus deconstructs the meaning people mistakenly place in the Temple. He says that the temple is an earthly symbol. Jesus does not want people to put their faith in a worthless symbol or a faulty institution. He wants us to put our faith in Him – the Living God.

This is why we should never put our faith in church or any kind of institutionalized religion. The gospels show that Jesus is always in conflict with religious authorities – the scribes or the Pharisees. For instance, when Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, the authorities condemn Jesus for not following the religious law. Jesus cares much more about the suffering man than he does the institutional understanding of the law.

This is why the institutional church is often a real impediment to the gospel. Do you know anybody who has just given up going to church because they’ve been burned too many times? Can you blame them? The institution always seems to win out over the individual. Institutions are like a monster in a horror movie that comes to life, gains strength and power and then destroys the individual people in its path. The Bible calls the church the Bride of Christ; too often the Church is also the Bride of Frankenstein!

Why am I saying all this? We are obviously part of the institutionalized church – the oldest in our community. I’m saying it because the church cannot save you; only God can. And that is just what God wants to do.

I'm saying it because God loves you individually. God cares about you specifically. Jesus cares about the man with the withered hand who needs healing; he doesn't care about a religious law about the Sabbath day. Jesus cares more about you than He cares about an institution.

One of the things a Young Life leader said when I was in high school really connected and led to my conversion. "If you were the only person living on earth, the Christ would still have died for you." I needed a God who loved me individually. I still do. Don't you? Don't you need a God who loves you and cares about your anxiety? Don't you need a God who knows what delights you as well as what frightens you? Don't you need a God who says that not a hair will fall from your head without his knowledge and his will? Don't you need a God who knit you together in your mother's womb and knew you from before the foundation of the earth?

A God like that can't just live in one place. There are a lot of people on this earth. The destruction of the temple tells us that God doesn't live in one place so that now He can live in every place. Here's what Jesus says in John 2 - "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" The Jews thought he was crazy. It took 46 years to build and you're going to rebuild it in 3 days?!?! But John tells us that Jesus was not talking about the marble and gold and façade; he was talking about the temple of his body.

Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead. The Holy Spirit is given to us now to love us individually. We don't have to go to where God lives, God comes to where we live. And he comes to where you live with his forgiveness, his grace and his love.

Believe it or not, Advent and Christmas are just around the corner. God became a man because He is interested in a relationship of love with people. Christ is not interested in Christianity. Christianity cannot save you or love you. Creeds or belief systems or moral codes cannot save you or love you. Only Jesus can do that. In fact, He came to do just that. If you have confused the church with the Lord of the church, maybe now is the time to connect with God personally. Maybe now is the time to ask Him to come into your own heart, your own life, to come into your own house.

In Advent we focus not just on God becoming a man in Jesus, but on Jesus coming back at the end of history. Jesus talks about this in the passage today. We look forward to a new and reconstituted life in heaven. In heaven there is no institution. In heaven there is no institutional identity – neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. In heaven, there is no church – there is only one redeemed sinner after another praising God. In heaven, there is no holy water – there is only one redeemed sinner after another drinking the water of life.

In heaven there are only relationships of unmediated love. We will not be struck dead when we face God's unmediated glory. We will all be face to face with Jesus the Lamb that was Slain, worshipping and adoring him, basking in his love. And we will love him and adore him and be enthralled by his beauty.

And in heaven we will love each other perfectly. That's church! Relationships of unmediated love. And where that love exists right now, that's where real church is. Church isn't a building or an institution. It is a community of people loving others, inspired by the God who loves each one of you individually.

Amen.