LENT3B 2012 (read only)

It was after the first Saturday evening Mass in our new church that someone approached me, looked up and around our gathering space and said “what a lovely narthex”. I knew immediately that I was being subjected to some gentle ribbing because the word narthex had appeared prominently but with little explanation on the architect’s plans. I like to think that I was being teased and complimented at the same time because we have found this to be true; it is indeed a “lovely narthex”.

So what is a narthex?

Early church architects were asked to provide an area just outside the main body of the church for penitents and unbaptized candidates could stay during the liturgy. Over time it became an area used for all kinds of gatherings both liturgical and social. A place of welcoming and of providing for all kinds of needs. A place becomes a “lovely narthex” when it does these things well.

The Temple at Jerusalem had a place rather like a narthex in which people could gather freely and where various transactions could take place; such as the exchange of foreign money for temple coinage, or the purchase of animals for sacrifice.

This was the place where Jesus fell into a rage and overturned the tables. Clearly, the traders and money changers had become corrupt, ripping off the pilgrims and worshippers, and all within the precincts of the very place that most symbolised God’s desire to gather people of all nations, genders and ages.

All of which begs the question – is our church a place of welcome for others? Well, hopefully, yes it is; but it is always wise to remind ourselves that it is God who invites and we do well to hesitate before implying by thought, word or deed that anyone is unwelcome.

This is why official church pronouncements need to be extremely careful in the choice of language and in their tone. Wise and moderate language is better for conveying the sincerity of our concerns and beliefs. It also helps when we respect the sincerity and good intentions of those who hold views and pursue agendas which don’t immediately match our own.

Jesus was angered by those who placed barriers in the way of those who sought access to the Temple. His passion was such that he envisaged the price he would have to pay; giving up his own life to the wrath of his enemies. He could do this because of his absolute confidence that God would vindicate him by raising him from the dead.

Whenever we try and follow the example of Jesus; being passionate about God’s love for those shut out or marginalised, we can take heart from the words we heard last week, from St Paul’s letter to the Romans: “With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give [for] when God a quits, could anyone condemn?”

It is surely more Christ-like for us to broaden our minds and our welcome than to place limits on our affections. We might not always get it right but it is surely appropriate for us act out of a sincere desire to emulate the loving heart of Christ.

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