

## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 22nd July 2018

What are the very first recorded words of Our Lord in the Gospels? – “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my father’s business?” (Lk 2:49). St Luke records these words of a twelve-year-old Jesus, uttered to his parents in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Finding in the Temple is of course the last of the joyful mysteries of the Holy Rosary, which are in fact depicted, along with the sorrowful and glorious mysteries, in the windows of the Lady Chapel. The evangelist informs us that Jesus’ parents “understood not the word that he spoke unto them” (Lk 2:40). Their incomprehension probably relates not just to which “father” he was referring to, St Joseph or his Heavenly Father, but also to which “business”. The problem here is the vagueness, indeed typical for one of his age, of the word which he uses: “Did you not know that I must be in the [‘the’ in the plural form] of my father?” The plural form of the definite article, ‘the’, simply does not exist in English, and the nearest we could come to it would be ‘things’: “Did you not know that I must be in the things of my father?” You can perhaps better imagine now, when meditating upon the fifth joyful mystery, Our Lady and St Joseph thinking to themselves: “What’s he on about?”!

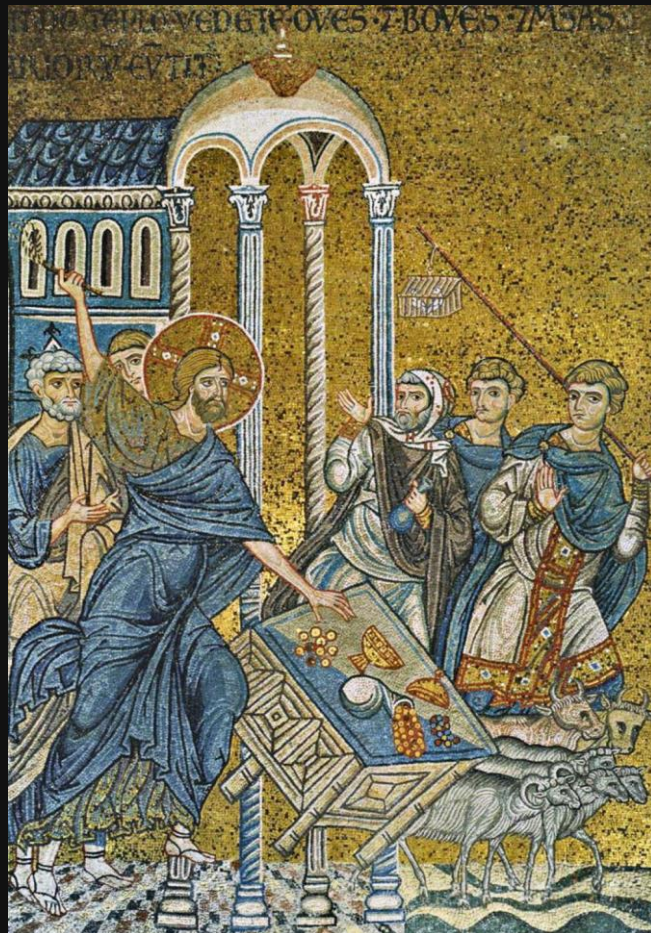


To make some sense of this adolescent statement, translators generally opt either for “business” or for “house”, assuming that “the” is connected either with the “business” of teaching in the

Temple or with the Temple itself as the “house” of the Heavenly Father – “I must be about my father's business” or “I must be in my father's house”, but it would be a mistake to rule out either of them – Our Lord’s statement was no doubt deliberately vague, not to consciously confuse his parents but so as to express a variety of valid meanings, which an adult would perhaps differentiate between. We said that this statement constituted the first recorded words of Our Lord. We then do not hear anything of his presence in the Temple at Jerusalem until the events of Palm Sunday when, after triumphantly entering the city and having wept over it, it is narrated in Luke that: “entering into the temple, he began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought, saying to them: It is written: My house is the house of prayer. But you have made it a den of thieves” (Lk 19:45-46). These, therefore, are the next recorded words of Our Lord in the Temple, and are somewhat less vague than the previous ones, as one would indeed expect of an adult and certainly of an adult, as in this case, with a clear message to deliver.

He cites Scripture, or rather two pieces of Scripture: “My house is the house of prayer” coming from Isaiah: “my house shall be called the house of prayer, for all nations” (Is 56:7); and “But you have made it a den of thieves” from Jeremiah: “Is this house then, in which my name hath been called upon, in your eyes become a den of thieves?” (Jr 7:11). Jesus obviously knew the Scriptures inside out and back to front, and here he powerfully combines two key passages of the Old Testament regarding the Temple: the Lord declaring it to be a “house of prayer, for all nations”, through the prophet Isaiah; and, in Jeremiah, lamenting the way in which it was treated by the Jews themselves. Like St Luke’s Gospel, St Matthew includes this double quotation. St Mark does so as well, but also has in fact “to all nations” (Mk 11:17), and as such has a fuller quote

from Isaiah, strangely missing from Matthew and Luke: perhaps they felt that it was too premature for Jesus to be talking about the mission to the nations, to the pagans, before his death. It is also interesting to note how St Luke omits many other things associated with the story of the Cleansing of the Temple, such as the turning over of tables and the scattering of coins: perhaps it was all too embarrassing!



Byzantine mosaic in the Cathedral of Monreale, Palermo, Sicily

Anyway, the evangelist Luke still talks of Our Lord casting “out them that sold therein, and them that bought” (Lk 19:45). Although his mother and foster-father did not understand what he had said to them (cf. Lk 2:40), there is no danger now of him being misunderstood, both in his words and in the actions which accompany them. If, during his last recorded visit, he did not

distinctly articulate that the Temple was the house of his Father; now he forcibly does so and also speaks of the need to respect it as such. Yet, does he really talk of the Temple specifically as 'his Father's house'? Listen to the Gospel again: "It is written: My house is the house of prayer. But you have made it a den of thieves" (Lk 19:45-46). No, technically he does not, though he does seem to quote the Scripture in such a way as to say: "*Our* house is the house of prayer, and how dare *you* turn it into a den of thieves"! This is reflected in St John's version, in which "*My* house" becomes "the house of *my* Father": "Take these things hence, and make not the house of *my* Father a house of traffic" (Jn 2:16). As the Lord will declare later on in the Gospel of John: "All things whatsoever the Father hath, are *mine*" (Jn 16:15), obviously including the Temple.

The stories, indeed the mysteries, of the Finding in the Temple and the Cleansing of the Temple, show us an adolescent and an adult Jesus respectively, yet both are conscious of the relationship with Father and of the Temple as his house, though expressed in different ways. On both occasions, he also appears to allude to the whole purpose of the Temple: the "things", or "business", of the Father which are to be conducted there. The Temple should be (and we can naturally substitute it for 'church') a place of learning about the Father, but above all, a place of prayer: "My house is the house of prayer". What it certainly should not be, however, is somewhere where other "business" gets in the way: "a house of traffic" (not "traffic" in the sense of a road jam: St John's Gospel here in fact uses the word 'emporium' – ἐμπόριον); or worse, a place where people are deceived and defrauded, "a den of thieves". That does not mean that we should go and start driving out the merchandise discreetly placed at the back of church. No, it means that we must allow this house to be what it is: a "house of prayer", *our* Father's house.