

Third Sunday of Lent

Ed Hays | Mar. 13, 2009

Jesus opens a can of worms today! That familiar saying refers to any inextricable tangle of problems that is released as soon as an issue is addressed. The can is opened when Jesus encounters the caretakers of God's Temple in Jerusalem, which bore a large label: Do Not Tamper With Our Religion!



What most people saw as an acceptable or perhaps even

praiseworthy use of that sacred space, he finds repulsive and diseased and, therefore, purges it ([John 2:13-25](#)) [1]. Earlier prophets had likewise condemned the Temple's empty-hearted yet rubrically precise sacrificial worship, but today the Galilean prophet's daring act opens a can of worms.

Worms, in the form of leeches, were once considered the great cure all for whatever made one sick. These three-to-four-inch long bloodsuckers were gathered from swamps for medicinal purposes. With their sharp teeth, they would open an incision in the flesh and then suck out a patient's blood.

The prescription for headaches was to place six large leeches on the forehead for several hours. For depression, they were used three to five times a day, so they would draw at least two pints of blood; hysterical patients were drained of four pints or until they became calm. As strange as all this may sound, the use of leeches was actually a medical advance over the customary practice that began in 400 B.C. by the Greeks, who instead drew blood with a knife to purge the body. We still have relics of this cure: the red-and-white striped poles in front of barbershops. In medieval times these were also bleeders. Indeed, bleeding was a commonplace prophylactic protection against various afflictions. It was even used religiously to ensure chastity when older monks would bleed young monks to reduce their passionate urges.

Was idolatry the temple disease that Jesus sought to heal by drawing blood with his whip? In this Sunday's Exodus reading ([Exodus 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17](#)) [2], God thunders out against the disease of idol worship. "You shall not have other gods before me. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

The precise priestly rituals for Temple sacrifice in the time of Jesus required the use of only perfect animals, which led to the profitable business of providing these to poor pilgrims. Besides leading to frequent abuse and exploitation of the needy, Jesus found these practices idolatrous. To what extent do we today bow down before religious laws and customs as if they were gods?

Take a cue from today's story of Jesus purging God's house of prayer and examine the health of your personal

temple. To purge your prayer life of the disease templeitis, neither leeches nor the bleeder's knife is required but only a heartfelt resolution. Like the flu virus, templeitis constantly mutates into new strains that resist treatment. A fruitful Lent and a healthy spiritual life require continuous purging of our own bodily house of prayer. You might take Louis XIII of France, who had himself bled twice a day, except on holy days, as a patron for this ongoing purging and transformation of your prayer life.

? from *The Lenten Pharmacy* by Fr. Ed Hays



Prayer:

Jesus, strong in silence before your judges,
Jesus, concerned only with God's judgment,
give us your noble grace of conviction
to be concerned only in how God judges us.
Convince us that the weak are truly powerful,
when love and peace are their weapons.

If the day comes when we must stand
before the courts of earthly powers,
falsely accused or victims of rumor,
may we stand tall in your strength,
with your unshakable conviction,
that truth and justice are invincible. Amen

This week's mantra:

May the cross I trace upon myself transform my desire for revenge
into love for all those who cause me injury and pain.

? prayer and mantra from *The Pilgrimage Way of the Cross* by Fr. Ed Hays

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