



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Just whose church is it?

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John 2:13-22

13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. **15** So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. **16** To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" **17** His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." **18** The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" **19** Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." **20** They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" **21** But the temple he had spoken of was his body. **22** After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

We continue our journey through Lent to the cross. We have considered the Temptations of Jesus and the Graduate School of Discipleship.

John 2:12-21 reminds us that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, even though he lived such a distance from the city that meant he was not required to do so. Jesus' attendance at the Passover in Jerusalem was more than a custom that he observed; it was a definite choice to place himself under the authority and pattern of the Jewish law.

Jesus is at the Temple during this high festival and is greeted by a scene familiar to many, but for Jesus it may well have been unexpected. Merchants were offering sacrificial animals for sale to people travelling long distances for this annual pilgrimage. It was convenient for these people, who didn't want to bring animals on the journey to the temple site. Money changers accepted coinage from distant places and exchanged it for the special temple coins required to pay appropriate taxes.

Jesus' reaction has been described as 'shockingly aggressive'. All four gospels tell the story of Jesus 'cleansing' the temple, but each of the Synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – place this incident at the end of Jesus' ministry, albeit with a Passover backcloth. John has the account at the outset of Jesus' public ministry.

The scene is heightened by Jesus' use of 'a whip of cords' to drive the crowd from the outer courtyard, though there has been some debate about verse 15 as to whether Jesus is driving out the animals only – and merely turning over the tables.

This incident about the temple raises just as many issues about the church – and the question, 'Whose church is it?' is combined with an exploration into the zeal and anger of Jesus Christ which we see in this unique passage of scripture.

As already referred to, the Synoptics position the incident after he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, therefore a contributory incident that would lead to his arrest. In John, it takes place at the outset of his public ministry, after the wedding in Cana and Jesus spending time with his family and disciples in preparation for what lay ahead.

The significance for us on our journey to the cross is reinforced by the fact that Jesus sets up questions in people's minds as to his authority to commit such an act. He also gives the signal that the destruction of the temple and its rebuilding in three days refers to his death and resurrection.

Some use this incident as justification for personal anger, rather than understanding it as judgement against spiritual corruption, especially that of making the worship of God a commercial activity.

So what are we to make of such an incident? Certainly it is an insight into the humanity of Jesus. Jesus was angry! – and was the recipient of anger on many occasions.

Raymond Council captured Jesus' anger in a litany:

Lord, you were angry at Simon Peter
and called him Satan,
Lord, you were angry at the super-religious
and compared them to whitewashed tombs full of death,
Lord, you were angry at the moneylenders
and overturned their tables,
Lord, you were angry at those who gave a scorpion
calling it a fish and a stone calling it bread,
Lord, you were angry at all that keeps people
separated, walled in, cut off and locked up,
Lord, you at whom the world was angry
and who took upon yourself that rage,
endured and transformed it through the cross.

When people use the example of Jesus in this incident and say, 'It's OK for me to be angry as well,' they are often misguided. It is worth concentrating the mind on the difference between what triggers our anger and what led Jesus to become angry. Frequently, the vexation of people's lives is about what happens to them, rather than the much wider concerns of Jesus.

I am sure I am not the only one who has observed something of the comparatively new phenomenon of road rage. I recently witnessed it in a car park when a person drove into someone else's spot. It was hardly worthy of the response.

The anger of Jesus can in no way be related to this kind of vexation. There is some clear advice in the Book of Psalms: 'In your anger do not sin.' (Psalm 4:4) It is also from the Book of Psalms that we take a lead this evening as we read that the disciples remembered:

"Zeal for your house will consume me."
(John 2:17 from Psalm 69:9)

The question I ask is, 'Just whose church is it? Lent offers a time for spiritual and moral cleansing. Some begin to believe that the church is theirs, when in point of fact it is always God's.

ENSURE YOUR ANGER IS PROPERLY FOCUSED

There are some people who regularly exhibit anger and it becomes the prevailing feature of their lives. Whenever there is any thought of them, it is always in relation to 'outbursts, or violent actions'. This kind of anger is not only unacceptable, but totally incapable of being associated with the demeanour of Jesus Christ in this passage.

Part of the difficulty is that much anger becomes draining ... and it funnels everything to a singular point in the mind. It can saturate our thinking and dominate our living. It can go further and lead to instability of personality. Benjamin Franklin was bang on when he observed, "Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame." We all have moments of frustration and anger, and when focused on God then those incidents, however real, are short-lived. Anger, if not restrained, is frequently more hurtful to the angry person than the injury that provokes it. Let us then concentrate on the God-centred reasons for Jesus' anger:

- The temple was a place of worship, but became a setting for questionable commercial practice

At Passover people were attracted from a wide geographical area. The temple was the central focus. You can imagine the kind of shock waves that ran through the temple and the entire city of Jerusalem, when the controversial preacher caused such commotion. At the beginning of the feast all the excitement was caught up in preparations – and it is at this point that the commercial opportunities were being used and abused.

Throughout his gospel, John shows that Jesus gives new shape and meaning to the worship life of the people of God.

Sellers of cattle, sheep and doves and moneychangers rendered a useful service to visitors to Jerusalem. It is not the selling that is wrong; but the way in which it abused those who were marginalised. Some have argued that they could have sold near to the temple entrance, rather than within – but I believe that misses the point.

Whenever I have led groups to the Holy Land, I have taken them to see the model of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. In doing so, the party becomes aware of the huge footprint of the temple.

What matters in this incident is a concern not just with the fact that there were merchants and money changers and their exorbitant prices – but that they disrupted Gentile worshippers in the only place in the temple open to them – the Court of the Gentiles.

Andreas J Köstenberger describes this as "insensitive at best and evidence of religious arrogance at worst".

- The incident opens up a conversation around 'righteous indignation'

In a previous role, I knew someone who was a very angry person who tore into ministers and pastors in public and undermined them in private - and felt justified in doing so. This was often to the embarrassment of his wife, but what became clear one day was that he had actually wanted to be a minister himself.

A Sunday school class made an unusual request. They asked that in church worship the prayer of confession be taken out of the order of service. They gave the following reasons: Confessions imply that we are bad people.

Our children will get a negative image of themselves.
Guilt is damaging; we need to think positively.

Worship should always be uplifting and make us feel good.

These points demonstrate that they were not really aware of the reality of grace and forgiveness, which are so intricately bound up with confession in the proper sense.

- The authorities did not understand the justice of Jesus Christ

In the Christian community, people have often found themselves dividing into camps. But there are two camps that seem to emerge which don't have any particular names and I would call one 'Those who are naturally mean-spirited' and the other are 'Those who are generous in spirit'. The Jewish authorities of the day were not generous in their attention to anyone outside the confines of their religion. This still has so much to say to us.

DON'T WASTE YOUR ANGER ON THE TRIVIAL

Kingsley Barrett points to the pivotal role of the temple cleansing in John: "The present passage occupies a position of great importance. After the section devoted to the calling of the disciples, in which the glory of Christ is foreshadowed (2:11), John begins to develop his main theme, that in Jesus the eternal purposes of God find their fulfilment."

We do well to deal with anger in our own lives when it is all-consuming and turns the focus away from our centre on God. Jesus' anger is much more to do with the concept of spiritual zeal. The spiritual aspect is so important, because:

- Spiritual zeal has its object and roots in the purity of God

I make a careful distinction between anger in general and spiritual zeal: one is focused on ourselves – and the other points to its object in God. This is not to suggest that religious zeal cannot be misplaced, but rather that it can be an appropriate context for 'anger without sin'.

Gerard Sloyan suggests that until now John has situated Jesus only marginally in the religious life of his people:

- He is in the desert with John the Baptist (1:19)
- He is with the ritually observant Pharisees (1:24)
- He is within family life at a wedding feast (2:1-11)
- He experiences respite at Capernaum (2:12)

Jesus' clash with the commerce of religion in the temple area at a major feast brings him right to the heart of the Jewish religion – and his concern for the purity of the religious life of the temple.

- Spiritual zeal reacts to spiritual misappropriation

Jesus saw the place of worship reduced to nothing more than a place of merchandise and corruption. The spiritual and the material became indistinguishable and the actions which abused the spiritual opportunity of those outside Judaism (ie the Gentiles) cause the deepest pain.

It was not possible to negotiate a settlement with regard to this – and so action was required. The attitude to the Gentiles and the financial benefit that people were gaining on the back of others was not just a moral issue, but a spiritual matter.

- Spiritual zeal may result in strong action

Jesus expressed his zeal in a most dramatic and forceful way. This is not a sign of weakness, but it is action that flows out of the spiritual purposes of God. His disciples must have been astounded at what they saw and the reactions witnessed as Jesus cleared the temple court.

This is in stark contrast to so much of Jesus' teaching. Where self was concerned, there needed to be a demonstration of generosity and love. We see it clearly in the Passion narrative.

The difference here was that it was to do with the spiritual significance of the temple as a place of prayer and care that the Gentiles had opportunity to worship unhindered.

WE MUST BE CONTINUALLY RENEWED AND REFORMED

The reaction of 'the Jews' at the overturning of the tables was understandable. They wanted to know what right Jesus had to behave in this way and required that he should prove his credentials with some kind of sign. In response to this demand he refers to the building of the temple. It had been about 46 years since the building began and it would be another 20 years before it was complete.

Jesus said in effect that after all the work and its obvious splendour on the eye, it was irrelevant and he was showing a better way. The radical nature of all this would not be lost on his audience at the time ... and for the early readers and community of the gospel.

- Lent is an appropriate time for spiritual cleansing

Lent is such an important season in the Christian calendar and the call of God is to recognise the importance of repentance – that complete turn from what is wrong to find the new life in Christ.

The words of the Old Testament prophet Joel still ring true:

“Yet even now return to me with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” (Joel 2:12)

The disciplines of Lent are prayer, fasting and giving to others – and Jesus explained how they are to be exercised (Matthew 6). This is a time for spiritual cleansing.

- We must see our vision of Christian discipleship in the midst of a community set in a world in need of renewal and reform

The call of God is to understand our faith as a context for renewing our lives in God's presence, but it is also important to see the broader and wider perspective. The Gospel of John is held together by a series of 'signs and narratives' and, although this is not explicitly a sign, it is a 'deed-word action'.

- This incident also points to the renewing and reforming role of the Christian community at mission

John's motive for placing it at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus is important, unless we take the unlikely view that there were two cleansing incidents in the temple. Ralph Martin argues that "John's own narrative suggests the close proximity of the Passion – cf. in particular Jesus saying about the destruction of the Temple."

It has a distinct position in Lent and in many traditions it is found at the head of Holy Week.

As Jesus overturned the tables of those running their business in the temple courtyard, he identified the temple as 'his Father's house'. Too much understanding of religion is invariably focused upon congregations as private domains. We are reminded that the Christian context is always a God context.

During this season, we are presented the opportunity of spiritual and moral cleansing. After Jesus cleansed the temple, irate merchants demanded to know the credentials that enabled him to behave in such a way.

We read that Jesus responded to their request to know his authority: "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*" No doubt folks thought of 'the temple' as the magnificent stone edifice that surrounded them, but Jesus speaks of himself.

We have just had the 2015 Oscars for the film industry. In 2000 a quite remarkable incident occurred. 53 of 55 statuettes were stolen from a loading dock in California. They were discovered just before the ceremony in some dustbins behind a 24 hour coin-operated launderette by a dumpster driver.

Will Fulgear, 61, who eked out a living salvaging and recycling garbage, was fishing through the rubbish at 9.30 at night. He made a surprising find – literally stumbling on the cache of gold-plated prizes.

Fulgear crammed the Oscar-filled boxes into the trunk of his car. He was questioned and then became eligible for a \$50,000 reward, posted by Roadway Express. When he was asked what he would do with the reward, he said he wanted to move out of his one room apartment and help his son buy a house. He added, "Besides that, some of the Tinseltown types never even get a sniff of the Oscars and I've handled most of them."

God meets us in the most unlikely of contexts – and in the most unlikely of people. At a place where we see the anger of Jesus displayed against what is wrong and unworthy of God, his anger becomes a pointer to the way forward.

The overturning of the tables becomes the sign that God's grace and love is available to all – and that the kingdom of God will be taken into the very heart of Jewish life.