

Sermon for Sunday March 3, 2024
Church of All Nations

The old stained glass image of “gentle Jesus holding some lambs and patting children on the head takes a bit of a battering in today’s gospel reading, doesn’t it? And that question beloved by evangelical churches of “What Would Jesus Do?” takes on a new interesting slant. What would Jesus do? Go crazy with a whip, overturn tables and chase people out of church! Is this Angry Jesus... do you have a place in your relationship with Jesus for Angry Jesus. When I say angry think righteous indignation, one who will not be pandered to condescended to, fobbed off. Today we have the only violent action of Jesus we know of – provocatively reserved for the religious and worship centre of the nation.

The story of Jesus clearing or cleansing in the temple appears in all four gospels. In the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) it comes right near the end, in the week Jesus is crucified, but here in John’s gospel, it is at the start, in only the second chapter. It is one of the first pictures of Jesus that John gives us. In the synoptics it is part of the action that brings to a head the growing crisis facing Jesus and leads to his execution. In John this incident more serves to set the scene, to give insight into who Jesus may be, so we may better understand his words and actions as they unfold during his ministry. Bit like a movie where it starts with a scene that is actually much later in the plot and then you go back and allow the action to unfold knowing where it is leading to. And along the way you are saying to yourself Oh yeah I remember that guy was in that opening scene which we still haven’t got to you yet, or you go, Oh that comment will come to have huge significance later in this story and now I have seen the context in which it was given. Kierkegaard said Life must be lived forward but can only be understood backwards.

And so John’s gospel has early scenes that together paint a picture of the new age Jesus is initiating. We hear of the New or second birth with Nicodemus, new wine in the wedding from Cana and here in the assault upon the Temple system the new location of the presence of God in the flesh/body of Jesus.

Why Jesus so cranky?

The temple was the place where people went to worship, to meet with God. And this event took place at Passover, which was the most important occasion on which everyone sought to make it to the temple to celebrate what God had done for them. Like us, they turn up to meet with God, to praise God.

Pilgrims coming from countryside would be able to purchase an animal for sacrifice. A sheep or goat if wealthy, doves if poor. Rather than bring them, with all that inconvenience and then risk them not being accepted as unblemished, you could purchase them at the temple. First opportunity for someone to make money! But not with the polluted Roman money whose coins had an image of the Caesar- a divine figure hence an abomination. So you also could change coins for acceptable currency. Human nature being

what it is any time there is a transaction it is an opportunity for some profit. Second opportunity to make some money. 10% maybe 15%.

Interestingly the dove sellers are mentioned specifically in the gospels. This is the sacrifice of the poor person. Richer people would sacrifice lambs or cattle but scripture explicitly allows for doves to be sacrificed for the poor. So these are making money from a sacrificial system based on profit from the poorest.

Too many obstacles had been put in the way of people's worship of God. The gracious gift of the Law, the covenant people of God, the temple worship and animal worship, all this had become little more than an obstacle in people's desire to worship God. Jesus has come to upend all that will keep people from the Holy.

Jesus' disruption that day in the temple was a powerful sign of Jesus' disruption of the way things were. That is what causes Jesus to engage in a protest action that shuts down the financial system of the city during the annual peak of its commercial activity, where he "would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts" during the Passover week. An action akin to shutting down the stock exchange trading floor or on line shopping during the week before Christmas.

We had an interesting conversation at our Lenten studies about monetary exchange at church. I think it was in the context of paying for the study books and people handing over fist fulls of dollars at Mac's during the week as they paid for their book and me saying in a light hearted way, lucky we are not doing this on Sunday at church. Which then led to a more serious discussion of how do we think of for instance, jam or cakes we sell to raise money for refugees, or raffles, or whatever...

People's tolerance of some activities will vary. What seems like ministry – and the sustaining of ministry - to one, feels like tawdry wheeling and dealing to another. How do we make decisions and keep perspective? There is a clue in the text. Not a direct answer for us but a clue. Jesus was confronted about his action. The leaders of the Jewish people and temple came to Jesus and said, "What sign says you can get away with such outrageous actions?"

"Destroy this temple, and I'll raise it up in three days." You can't blame them for going literal. But John tells us readers that he was predicting his own death and Resurrection. He was moving from building to body, from structure to being, from that thing there to this person here.

Maybe that's the key for us as well. Worship is about Resurrection. We are being raised up as we gather and sing and pray and commune together around word and sacrament. So, we are asking the question about what we do when we gather: "What will raise us up?" What honors God first and lifts the people into God's presence when we come together as the body of Christ? What distracts and demeans ought to be avoided. What elevates and gathers in is where we need to be. We live in a world that can destroy the body and the

soul. If we are to stand against that which tears down, we need to consider how we are building up.

You can bet your last goat or turtledove that when we do get sidetracked, the all-consuming Jesus will start turning over a few tables and discomfoting the comfortable.

He said this about his body the temple of God the dwelling place of the holy. Holy Communion when we eat the body, when we partake and become the living body.