

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

March 4, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our gospel reading today, we hear that “the Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” The Passover, which is held in February or March each year, celebrates the story of how the Israelites were delivered out of Egypt, and out of slavery. We hear that when Jesus entered the Temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and money changers seated at their tables. The money changers are there to convert Roman money into shekels, so that pilgrims can pay the Temple tax, also known as Invite, Welcome and Collect.

At the sight of the money changers and traders in the Temple, Jesus makes a whip of cords, and drives out the sheep and cattle, along with the money changers and traders. It was probably the last thing people expected, that this gentle prophet would suddenly become his own avenging angel, forcing people and animals out onto the street. It says a lot about Jesus' presence - both moral and physical, that he could do this. As a final statement, Jesus pours the coins of the money changers onto the dirty floor and then overturns their tables.

When I first thought of preaching today, I wanted to bring a table into the church, and bags of coins. I was going to pour the coins over the floor and then finish up by overturning the tables, because I wanted to hear the sound of the table smashing against the floor. I wanted us to experience the drama and the violence of what happened that day.

This is an example of righteous anger - and it is not just anyone's anger, but God's anger. It's rare to find God's anger in the New Testament - we more used to hearing about that in the Old Testament. Indeed, I hear an echo of the table crashing to the floor in what I imagine was the clap of thunder that signaled the beginning of the Flood. In the book of Genesis, God is so disillusioned with humankind that he resolves to destroy them, by drowning them in a flood of rain. Yet, he saves Noah and his family, and the animals.

Why was Jesus filled with anger at what he saw in the Temple? It is worth reminding ourselves what the Temple was - it was the house of God, the place of worship and sacrifice, the place of the holy of holies, where each year every Jew would come to offer sacrifice and give thanks for their deliverance from slavery. Jesus himself has a special memory of the Temple, for it was here, when he was only 12 years old, that he spent three days listening to the teachers, and asking them questions. The Temple was Jesus' second home, his natural milieu, where he could talk about these things of God with others. Now, to his disappointment, he sees it defiled by sheep, cattle and money changers.

Last week, in our study group which meets on a Wednesday evening, I asked the group to brainstorm the things they would want to see in an ideal world. Someone said water, another said air, another said people. I was struck by one of the answers, however, because someone said “respect”. In an ideal world, there would be “respect.” And I think that's right, and that is what was missing from the Temple, on that day when Jesus walked in. I don't mean respect for the sincere worshippers who were there, or respect for the law about Temple tax. I mean respect for God, in God's house.

The story about Jesus cleansing the Temple raises fundamental questions about our relationship with God, first with God himself, and second, with God's Temple. First, our relationship with God should be a close one, following the example of Jesus who called his Father in heaven, Abba, or as we would translate it, "Papa" or Daddy". Jesus' relationship, and our relationship, is based on trust and intimacy, and contradicts the idea that God is a remote figure, distant from us.

Our relationship to God acknowledges that God is someone greater than me, so that when I pray to God, I am praying to God the Most High, the creator of the world, the universe, and all that lives and breathes. In many ways, it is God who is wholly responsible for whether I live or die. So I need to give God the respect he deserves, and not take him for granted, or take him lightly, or pretend he is just like you or me.

A lack of respect was, I believe, behind the reason the traders and money changers were in the Temple. In those days, the Temple precinct covered nearly a fifth of the total area of Jerusalem. It seems reasonable to ask why God needs all that space to himself? I can imagine the money changers saying, "We are only going to take up a corner of it. I'm sure God won't mind."

When I was at Seminary, we used to have conversations on the subject of sacred space. Some of us would argue that the church is a sacred space - a space set aside for the holy, the sacred, and that this space should not be turned over for other use. Others had a different opinion. They said we need to use the church space for other things, like inviting in members from the community, who want to do Yoga, or sell books, or sell plants, or hold political meetings. I defended the idea of the sacred space, where we honor God with our respect, our worship and our silence. From my own experience I knew there were churches where you felt a sense of God's presence as you walked into the church. I said churches should be places where you can stop at any time and say a prayer, or join a daily office or Eucharist. Temples and churches are not utilitarian places. That's the mistake we make when we think only in terms of utility - "how are we maximizing this space? What is the return on the use of this space?" "We are only going to take up a corner of it. I'm sure God won't mind."

Well, in today's gospel passage, Jesus turned up and yes, God did mind - he minded a great deal. Jesus was angry because the traders and cattle owners were not respecting the holy ground on which they thought they could trade and deal, and think God would not care. They were claiming part of the Temple as *their* space, and not God's. Let's listen again to what Jesus tells them: to those who were selling doves, Jesus says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" I know why Jesus was angry - after all, this was personal. Jesus is in his *Father's* house, and what are these people doing? Showing their ignorance, showing their disrespect to his Father in heaven. Don't they know where they are? Is the Temple there to make them rich? What Jesus sees is the way the people have grown dull in their sinfulness, blind in their greed. They need a slap to the face to bring them awake, and Jesus is fired with jealousy for his Father's house.

Jesus wants to protect the Temple from the encroachment of the worldly traders. But his words and actions will have made him enemies, since the words he uttered that day - "destroy

this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” - will be used in evidence later when he is charged with blasphemy.

Jesus has not stopped having zeal for his Father’s House. At St Martha’s Church in Bethany Beach, Jesus is present in our worship, and feeds us with the bread of word and sacrament. This is the place of encounter, where we can meet God and pray to him and know that he is pleased to have a home here with us. We welcome all people in his name. We are not here to trade anything, or to make financial gain for ourselves. We follow Jesus, who gave his life as a sacrifice for us. In our Temple, we offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for what he has done. We gather every week in God’s holy place, the church, to listen and to be renewed in the faith of Christ. My friends, what a blessing it is to be here! What a blessing it is to be with God in his Temple.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford