

Sermon Lent 3 Year B 2018

While I am sure you are all familiar with the incident from Jesus' life recounted for us in the gospel today, it does contain (I suspect for many of us) an element of surprise. The cleansing of the Temple - which shows a violent, angry, determined side of Jesus - doesn't easily sit with the image many of us have of Jesus. It can seem *out of character*. Jesus over-turning tables, who forms a whip and drives people out does not at all conform easily with the Jesus of moralistic or liberal religion who is supposedly kind and nice to everyone, who welcomes everyone without demand or cost and is tolerant of every shade and variety of human behaviour.

But this sweet, kind, non-confronting and non-demanding Jesus is not really the Jesus of the gospels. If we take the whole scope of the gospels seriously then we will see that Jesus over turning the tables in the Temple is *not that surprising* at all. It really *isn't* out of character. Because, of course, the Jesus in the scene described for us today is also the same Jesus who says *you brood of vipers, you white washed tombs, better if a mill stone were tied around their neck and thrown into the sea! I have not come to bring peace but division! I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were burning already!* Ah! Yes! Those bits as well.... So, Jesus in the Temple: Disturbing. Yes. Challenging. Yes. Confronting. Yes. But it oughtn't really be surprising.

Now, all four gospels carry this story of the cleansing of the Temple, so clearly it was an important account for the early Christian communities. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this story near the end of Jesus' ministry where it provides something of the catalyst in the decision to kill Jesus. But it doesn't work that way in John, whom we hear today. John places it almost at *the start* of his Gospel. By placing this account at the outset of his Gospel John frames his *entire* Gospel in terms of Christ's death and passion, an idea reinforced by placing the cleansing of the Temple in the context of Passover. In John's account of the Passion, Christ dies at the hour the Passover lamb is sacrificed. So, John puts the story we hear at the outset of his Gospel to we don't come to the end of his Gospel and be surprised at how it ends!

Just as this story of the cleansing of the Temple directs us towards Jesus and his sacrificial death, it also directs us toward the church. In telling us about Jesus driving out the money changers, the sheep and cattle, the pigeon sellers, and in talking about the destruction of the Temple, John is not attacking institutions or rites and customs and special places. John, perhaps more than any of the gospel writers knows of the power of these to communicate God's truth. But he *is* challenging the tendency for proper devotion, proper worship to become to become obscured or lost. Misguided and misdirected worship and devotion is of course the old sin of idolatry. The ancient evil is tenacious and insidious and slow to die. The Temple built as a witness to God and as way of drawing men and women to God had lost its focus. It had built up around itself layers of accretions obscuring its purpose. For some it had become a money-making opportunity, an opportunity to exploit, as far away from the plan and intention of the Temple as you could imagine. Israel had lost its way.

And so, once more, it is not at all surprising that the Lord Christ should in such a dramatic and forceful way sweep away the distractions and obstructions operating at the Temple. He sets out to put things back into *order*; to realign Israel's worship back to its God, back to the purity and holiness God intended for his people. To remind us of this essential call to purity and holiness we also hear today of the giving of the Ten Commandments. While the Temple lay at the heart of Israel's religious life and public worship, the Ten Commandments lay at the heart of Israel's ethical code. And they are about *good order*: about recognising our proper and ordered relationship with God and our proper and ordered relationship with each other. And in this good order absolute priority is given to God.

Israel's tendency to stray, to get lost, to head off in the wrong direction, to obscure the purity of God's plan and design is of course *our* tendency as well. In this holy season of Lent the church bids us to reorient - reorder - our lives back to God - to God's good order; God's good design. For the faithful believer this is our lifelong task. Often this is quite difficult!

Sometimes what is needed is a jolly good shake up to wake us up to the seriousness of the task at hand. Now, no one is accountable for our own life of faith except ourselves! If we don't like how things are in our life, then we need to take responsibility to change it, though we need to be open to receiving the help, support and encouragement as we need it. We need the humility to accept we need to change, and humility to admit we cannot do it alone.

As we make our journey toward the Cross in this Lenten season the account of the cleansing of the Temple helps us to see that in the plan of God there is no surprise that Christ must pay the ultimate price with his own life. And the Gospel writer John also doesn't want us to be surprised that there will be cost for us as well. If we seek to follow Jesus, then there will need to be a costly reordering and redirecting of our lives back to God. And we will need to be vigilant that what belongs to God is indeed given (and kept for) God. Amen.