

Lent III – Year B

The portrait of Jesus in today's Gospel is a world away from the storybook caricature of Jesus, the meek and mild figure whose harmlessness looks indistinguishable from blankness. Christians who believe they just need to be nice might find this story of cleansing the temple a little too confronting and disturbing, *as Jesus did use force; and was certainly aggressive, as he did make a whip of cords, and drove all of the people selling oxen, sheep, and pigeons, poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables, and told them off saying "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!", according to the synoptics - Mark, Matthew and Luke he accused them saying "my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations but you have made it a den of robbers"* Certainly, Jesus was upset, aggressive and even angry according to all the four gospels. So the mild and meek Jesus is not at work today in the temple; Jesus is aggressive today!

On the other hand, an equal caricature is to use this passage to make Jesus into a godfather of violence, a revolutionary willing to support total destruction and mayhem for the sake of a cause, as we have seen in political and national history, as well as in some cancel culture protests of the 21st Century to bring about anarchy. Jesus did use force in the temple, but he did not use force to secure power for himself, his kingdom could not be established by violence. Jesus' aggression was at the service of his Father's house, for the advancement of the kingdom of God. The casualties of his Zealous Cleansing of the Temple turned out to be displaced traders and cattle, not dead people or massive property damage.

Aggression is part of our human make up. We all get aggressive or angry. If you are not aggressive or angry about anything you need to see a doctor, you

might be suffering from clinical depression or something similar. Why are we reluctant to speak about our own aggressive attitudes and behaviour? We have been taught not to get angry, so we try to cover our aggression in the language of politeness, but they tend to leak through the strain of civility at times, or when we are old enough and fed up of masking up. Perhaps our reluctance to own aggression is because we tend to *associate aggression with destructive anger which inflicts cruelty on others*. But aggression can be a constructive act. The word aggression comes from the Latin root *aggredi*, which means **“to go forward, to approach, to move against”**. Constructive aggression means taking the initiative to support what is important, true and right; it means working in a hostile environment to bring about justice and truth. Constructive aggression is about fighting the good fight as St. Paul put it, striving to bring the values of the Kingdom of God into our dark and fallen world and standing up for our beliefs. In this sense, Jesus has been aggressive not just on this occasion at the temple, but in many instances throughout his entire life. He was zealous and passionate about doing the will of God, no matter what the cost was. In his sense, he was always **going forward with his mission, approaching danger and hostility, and moving against the religious forces he encountered in bringing forth the New Covenant : aggressive**.

The mission of Jesus included the fulfilment of Judaism. While he was a faithful Jew he was establishing the New Covenant with his very life. People at the temple were not doing anything wrong, but merely following the Old Covenant; The coins acceptable in the temple were half shekels and Roman coins were not acceptable because they were imprinted with the image of the Emperor and the commandments clearly prohibited graven images to be used by Jews. The money-changes were actually performing a necessary task for the proper functioning of the religious life of Israel. Next, the trade in animals was necessary for sacrifice at the Temple. People needed to sacrifice for a number of religious

reasons, as the Law prescribed various animal sacrifices. However, this trade was under a monopoly of the wealthy and elite Sadducees who controlled the Temple Cult, which Jesus would have known. Nevertheless, Temple was the central part of their religious observance. Firstly, Jesus restores the Temple to be his Father's House of prayer instead of a den for robbers but then indicates the end of animal sacrificial practices as he speaks of his own body as the new Temple.

The Fourth Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, places the episode of cleansing the temple at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, since it has essential reference to the events of his death and resurrection. In driving out from the Temple the animals brought there for sacrifice Jesus is in effect shutting it down as a place of worship. His own body is now to become the 'place' or sanctuary where God is present and is to be worshipped. 'Zeal for his father's house' will 'destroy' him in the sense that his attempt to break the confinement of worship to the physical Temple will provoke the hostility that will ultimately lead to the destruction of his own physical body.

Many of the historical critics of the New Testament hold that this event of cleansing the temple – shocking, and unprecedented, was what finally persuaded the religious leaders that Jesus merited execution. Jesus did state “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” – This was brought as witness at his trial.

But in resurrection Jesus will 'raise up' the new sanctuary of his risen body where his disciples and all subsequent believers will truly 'dwell' with God and God with them. The disciples will grasp the full significance of what he is now saying when they 'remember' it in the light of these later events.

What are we angry about? Where is our aggression? What consumes you? or inspires zeal in you? Where is God asking you to turn the tables and or make

a whip? If our own aggression could be employed for the advancement of God's Kingdom, perhaps God's Kingdom would be a more obvious domain in our world. It is way too comfortable to be nice instead and not have dirt on our hands or trouble in our lives. So we hang back from confronting any hostile powers. Let us ask God to give us courage and aggression to fight the good fight. In drawing back or in being lukewarm we continue to give permission to the traders to occupy the Temple and the greedy to exploit the poor. At times, disturbing the peace with constructive aggression is a very Christian thing to do.