

Sermon Lent 3, Sunday 7 March 2021

John 2 v 13-22

Iwonder if you have had a time in your life when you faced a severe challenge which was too much for you. I certainly have. I remember when I was at school and had to read for the first time at assembly.. The whole school was gathered and all the staff. I was terrified and had done nothing like this before. I got to the lectern and began to read. All of a sudden I heard a noise - knock, knock, knock. It was my knees knocking together in fright!

Jesus in the Gospel faces a challenge - the misuse of the temple. He turns it round himself and challenges the very centre of Jewish religion. John obviously thought this was very important as he placed it at the beginning of his Gospel and the others place it at the passion.

This action evoked the final hostility of the Jewish leaders. Jesus sought a radically new direction to the central symbol of its religious life and worship. The temple in Jesus' day was the central symbol of Judaism. It was the location of Israel's continuing worship and the topic of some of its most vital stories. The temple was regarded as the dwelling place of Israel's covenant with God. It was the place of sacrifice. It was the place where forgiveness of sins and cleansing from defilement was assured.

It also functioned as the political as well as religious centre of Judaism. It pointed not only to YHWH's promise to dwell with this people and reverse their exile but also, the legitimization of their rulers who built it, rebuilt it, and continued to run it. Jesus' action proclaims that the time has come for something as drastic as the institution of the temple to be transcended. The kingdom was coming upon Jerusalem and if this did not happen there would be ruin.

Israel's God was in the process of judging and redeeming his people anew as the climax of Israel's whole history. In returning to Zion YHWH would not after all take residence in the temple legitimising its present administration and its place and function in the Jewish world. "Destroy this temple" says Jesus, "and in three days I will raise it up again."

Instead of the temple he spoke of the way in which the culmination of his life, his future, his risen body would be the symbol, the focus of the new covenant. Secondly his action was a demonstration of the constructive use of anger. It was not the kind of anger which is the loss of control. It was deliberate; he made a whip of cords. It was planned. Jesus' action was not just a prophetic gesture, though it was that it was anger in action. He drove the animals out of the precinct with his whip. He caused chaos among the money changers overturning their tables. And finally undermined the dealers in pigeons with their caged birds.

Struggling to understand it the disciples recalled the words of Scripture "Zeal for thy house will consume me". The disturbed Jews challenged Jesus, "How can you justify your action?" His action provoked controversy and more anger. Surely, we are taught anger is wrong, especially for a Christian. But feelings in themselves are neither right or wrong. Can we stay with them and allow ourselves to really feel them like Jesus?

In this story we see anger not the sort that is out of control but as nudge towards creative choices and a discovery of positive energy. Here was Jesus' deepest longing which he owned and expressed. The kingdom was coming upon Jerusalem and the moment would be the climax of Israel's history and all that Jerusalem stood for. The temple was operating in a way that was destructive both to those involved and, more importantly, to the will of God.

Jesus states the reason for this action, "You must not turn my Father's house into a market." His words fulfil Scripture, the last words of Zechariah, "There shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts in that day". Jesus deliberately fulfilled that prophecy and his deed proclaimed the arrival of that day, the day of the Lord.

So what should we feel about anger? A friend of mine was outraged about what was happening to the Rohingya people as they were driven out of Burma. Indeed, one UN official

was reported as saying that it amounted to genocide. She wanted to do something practical and so set up a collection to go towards helping them. She raised two thousand five hundred pounds.

Righteous anger is justice and is the springboard for moving us on to constructive work with what comes across as difficult and challenging. In the words of Ireneaus, a doctor of the church, "The glory of God is a human alive, and a human full alive is the vision of God."

The final point I want to make is that his action is a reminder of the full scope and universal appeal of the Jewish faith. What Jesus did was to challenge the practice of Judaism to keep the temple to itself. There was a court of Gentiles in the temple. But if a Gentile ventured beyond it they were under the threat and penalty of death. Jesus protests Israel has failed to fulfil her mission to all humanity. Israel thought she could get away with it by preserving the mere externals of ceremonial and sacrificial worship. And the drama of this action is why it is placed at the centre of Lent.

Finally then, the power of this action aroused a hostility which resulted in relentless pressure from the highest figures for his execution.

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