

Third Sunday of Lent, Year B

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

PRAY

This morning we are looking at an account of Jesus clearing the temple at Passover time. You may recall a similar account in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. In these gospels the writer places the event close to the end of Jesus's life. But here, in today's gospel, John places it soon after Jesus's first miracle, the water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana.

Now it is possible that the cleansing of the temple in John occurs on a different occasion. John, after all, has Jesus going to the Passover in Jerusalem three times, not just once. And the words Jesus says in John "*Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!*" are different from the synoptics where he says "*It is written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'*"

But apart from this the four accounts are so similar that it is probable that this is the same incident. It is just that John chooses to write it into a different place in his gospel.

Why? Why does he do this? Well, it seems that John is not writing a biography. On the whole he is not writing a chronological history. He is writing theology.

And if this is what he is doing, then he has a very particular reason for putting this incident up front in his gospel. And juxtaposing it with the water turned into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. John is signalling the import of the gospel that follows. So let's see what we can surmise.

To put it into historical context, we should note that it was beholden on the Passover pilgrims to pay a levee of half a shekel to the temple. But the authorities stipulated that this had to be in the temple, not the local, currency; hence the money changers. And, of course, a Passover lamb was needed too, as well as cattle and doves for other sacrifices. And not everyone could bring these to Jerusalem from wherever they lived. So they bought them in the city.

Poor women who could not afford a lamb as a sacrifice for cleansing after giving birth would need to buy a couple of doves.

And I read that, "because of greed, the market for birds rose so much that not even the poorer women of the community could afford them." Similarly with the money changers behaviour; they were ripping people off.

So no wonder Jesus was angry *Stop turning my Father's house into a market!*

Throughout the Old Testament God has censured those who rip off other people, by using false weighing scales for example. And now it is going on in the temple itself, the one place where you would expect God's law to be respected and obeyed.

This obviously applies to us too. We should not be in the position of ripping people off in our places of worship - or anywhere else for that matter. Business practices should be fair and equitable and take into account cost of living issues and crises.

I must say that I do get uncomfortable when cathedrals charge an entry fee to visitors who only want to come in and pray, or light a candle. And of those places where the cost of the candle is much more than its original purchase price.

But the exploitation in the temple was more than just financial. The pilgrims were being exploited another way too. Their sacrificial worship for cleansing and the forgiveness of sins was being abused. They had to tick the boxes of the authorities and the merchants before they could be in a position to consider themselves made clean by God.

The whole system Jesus encountered in the temple was twisted. God had set out a system of sacrifices for cleansing and forgiveness that basically merely required the repentant acknowledgement of need – through the offering of a sacrifice.

But the temple system as Jesus found it undermined this and, in so doing, exposed a weakness of the Old Testament Law, the weakness that it could be manipulated for personal gain.

No wonder Jesus was incensed; salvation is not by deeds to appease the Almighty – and certainly not by man-made practices - but by faith, even under the Old Covenant.

The purchase of indulgences in the church in the Middle Ages before the Reformation was somewhat like this.

People were told that they could obtain favour with the Almighty, and a lesser sentence, by performing some particular action, such as a pilgrimage or by charitable giving. And we must beware of church practices today which might, however inadvertently, do the same.

But even done right the Old Covenant sacrificial system was a treadmill. You could never get free from the endless round of sacrifices in order to stay right

with God. Just as the cleansing water in Cana could never lead to the infilling of the new wine of the Spirit, so the Old Covenantal sacrificial system could never give the freedom of a clear conscience.

And I suspect that these deficiencies are the reasons why John puts this account up front in his gospel. Jesus has come to do away with the old and instigate the new; new wine in new wineskins, a new covenant based solely on faith.

In the temple the Jews demand a sign of Jesus's authority which he has so clearly displayed. But here, as at other times, they are not prepared to see the sign that Jesus offers.

They are perhaps too materially minded. They think he is talking about the actual temple building.

And we can have some sympathy with them can't we? Jesus talks of a temple while standing within the temple courts. How can the Jews, presumably leading Jews in the temple system, know that Jesus is talking about the temple of his body, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit?

They don't, but then they don't ask; they assume. They are so focussed on the substance of the temple building and its rituals that they do not see the spiritual, even when it's right in front of them. Their spirituality is based on religious practices, not a faith response to a gracious God.

But Jesus is talking about the temple of his body. He is looking forward to the time, not that far off, when he will be killed and three days later be raised to life. And he is looking forward to the time when not only the temple of his body will be destroyed but the temple system of the endless round of sacrifices will be destroyed too, replaced by his once-for-all perfect sacrifice for sin on the cross, attested to by his resurrection.

So what might this be saying to us today? Two things I think.

First, to make sure that we are not, individually or collectively, and certainly not for those outside, adding anything to Jesus's all-sufficient death on the cross. We can so easily do it without thinking. God's grace is all sufficient. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, nothing more. Belief and faith in Jesus are all we need; no further requirement.

Secondly, we must be careful not to exploit others. We need to avoid participation in practices where people are being exploited or ripped off

whether financially or emotionally. But also, perhaps, be ready to call it out if appropriate.

I confess that I don't do that; I go through life somewhat oblivious. But Jesus was not backward in coming forward and maybe we, I, should be more bold.