

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

What a scene – Jesus, whip in hand, raging at the wrong-doers at the Temple – animals fleeing in fear – doves flying around in a cloud of panic. Defying the Jews to destroy this temple, meaning his body, so that he will raise it up again. If Mel Gibson decides to make a prequel to his filmic paean to gruesome torture and death, he could call it “The Temper of the Christ”. Or, maybe Steven Spielberg and George Lucas could do a flick entitled “Indiana Jesus and the Doomed Temple”.

What was UP with Jesus that day? – all angry and defiant. Just one chapter earlier, the gospel of John had opened with this mystical hymn to the cosmic Christ:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Three questions have arisen from me from this gospel. First, what is the significance of the anger of Jesus in this scene? Second, how are we to deal with this very different portrayal of Jesus, whom we tend to think of as teacher, peacemaker, healer? And, third, why is this episode at the Temple significant in the context of today’s – and this season’s – worship?

Jesus’ anger is not directed exclusively – nay, not even primarily – at the money-changers and merchants. These business people set up their tables in the Court of the Gentiles, the outermost precincts of the great Temple. Their commerce was essential to the functioning of the Temple worship – they changed Roman and foreign coins into acceptable currency for donations, and sold animals to pilgrims who in turn offered them to the Temple priests for sacrifice. It was not so much the vendors and their business that offended; rather, Jesus’ anger is directed at the Temple cult – a system that Jesus, the Son of God, found offensive, maybe even corrupt.

But wasn’t Jesus a peacemaker? Couldn’t he have made an appointment to speak with the Temple authorities, the chief priests and scribes, about his concerns? Perhaps so, but would they have cared what a poor, swarthy rabbi had to say about their ancient, biblically-mandated sacrificial cult? No, in the same way that anyone in the inner circles of power and privilege would care little

for the rantings of a poor stranger, the Temple authorities in Jesus' time would have had little interest in him, at least as they knew him when the sun rose that day. You see, although the cleansing of the Temple is recorded in all four gospels, its placement in the chronology of Jesus' ministry is very different in John's gospel. Matthew, Mark and Luke all locate this event near the end of Jesus' ministry, where it is one of the immediate precipitators of the conspiracy to have Jesus rubbed out. Here in the fourth gospel, it is placed very early in the narrative, when not many people know him.

So, you see, Jesus is just getting his name out there! First he's an ethereal wisp in the heavens – the Word. Next, John the Baptist tells the priests and Levites cryptically about Jesus, then declares him the Lamb of God and the Son of God the next day. Jesus then encounters a growing circle of disciples, who accompany him to the wedding at Cana, where several more people get a glimpse of his 'unique abilities'. Hence, his tirade at the Temple is like his coming out. It's his first day in the big bad city, and he's going to make a splash!

How many of you have seen *Toy Story 2*? The climax of the film involves Woody and Buzz leading the other toys out to thwart a criminal. While Mr. Potato-Head, voiced acerbically by Don Rickles, is getting ready for the big event, Mrs. Potato-Head tells him that she is packing his 'angry eyes' just in case. Similarly, I think that the author of today's gospel has portrayed Jesus in such a froth to add fuel to the fire of his adversaries – and right from the beginning. This first encounter with the Jewish authorities sets off a conflict of world-views that will run through the whole gospel until Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and right into the time of the community for whom John wrote down this gospel.

Unlike the three synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), in which Jesus' full – and controversial – divine nature is only revealed gradually, this fourth gospel leaves the gate already portraying Jesus as the Christ, the King of Israel, the Son of God, the Word of God Incarnate. From the moment he enters Jerusalem here in Chapter 2, Jesus is a threat to the religious and political establishment, and at the same time a troubled outsider, rejected by his own, misunderstood by everyone except his followers, pursued by his adversaries. Remember these words from the prologue?

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

His own people, personified, by this author, as the Jewish authorities who nip at his heels through his ministry. And, everything John wrote in the subsequent pages of this gospel was intended to buttress that claim. You see, the Prologue to the Gospel according to John isn't just the greatest Christological hymn in the Bible. It is also like an abstract to a dissertation – an introduction to all that follows. And so, by his dramatic act at the Temple, Jesus kick-starts the conflict that will lead to his death and resurrection, and the fulfillment of his prophecy about the Temple.

Whether a simple dramatic effect or not, isn't it uncomfortable to imagine Jesus, the prince of peace, the suffering servant, the Lord of love, wielding a whip as he drives innocent animals and merchants from their stalls? Does he actually strike the merchants and animals with the whip? It's true that the cleansing of the Temple appears in multiple accounts, which gives it greater authenticity than tales that occur in only one gospel. But, it is only in John that Jesus uses a whip. This depiction of physical violence troubles me, and should trouble anyone who follows Jesus. This brings us back to my second question:

How do we deal with this portrayal of an angry Jesus?

We may decide that Jesus is not the simple, even simplistic, character we may imagine him to be. If asked to describe him, each one of us would give a different account of his person, because, when reading scripture, hearing sermons, watching movies, and generally observing the world, each one of us notes some things, overlooks others. We may focus on some details that either reinforce or challenge who we are and what we know and believe; and we may edit out elements that are either uninteresting or foreign or too challenging to absorb. The Jesus who blesses little children, heals the sick, forgives sins, and teaches about love and faithfulness is the same Jesus who curses the fig tree, warns that those who do not repent will perish, castigates the Pharisees and Saducees, and – yes – drives the moneychangers out with a whip. He's a complex individual!

One commentator says:

“From the very first, John’s Gospel is meant to stir up the reader, to force him or her to ask questions about who Jesus was, why he acted the way he did, how his ministry was related to God, and what it means to be one of his followers.”

Jesus’ anger, then compels us to consider the nature of our religion. In this day and age, when new churches with increasingly diverse theologies sprout up faster than dandelions in a summer lawn, we are forced to think about what it means to be one of Jesus’ followers to preserve our identity as Christians. But, we need to take care not to practice the same narrow-mindedness of which we accuse them. [Simply embracing a *different* narrow view of Jesus and Christianity is not the solution to failed Christian unity.] Opening ourselves to receive Jesus in his fullness – and doing so in community, not isolation – will move us toward an authentic shared faith.

While the author’s reason for playing up Jesus’ anger may be to heighten the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, the reason for Jesus’ words and actions in the first place is more central to our faith. Jesus clearly disapproves of the Temple cult, presumably because it is not faithful worship of God, but rather a ritualized system that substitutes money and sacrifice for spirit and truth. Recall what the prologue says about Jesus:

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

I repeat my third question: Why is this episode at the Temple significant in the context of today’s – and this season’s – worship?

The season of Lent is a time of preparation for Easter. In the early Church it comprised the final weeks of a lengthy period of preparation for those who would be baptized at the great Easter liturgy. While fasting and penitence were important parts of the Lenten experience, they were not its only aspects. Instead, these last weeks before Easter were the home stretch, leading to the finish line, when converts to the faith would be given new life in Christ through baptism; the biblical readings during Lent were carefully selected to present the richest and most important moments in

Jesus' life and ministry – the great healings and teachings and miracles, culminating in the raising of Lazarus on the Sunday before the Passion. Lent is about making Christ known to the Church.

Today's gospel proclaims that the new order of worship, and of knowing God, is in Jesus. When Jesus exhorts, even dares, the Jewish authorities, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he declares that his resurrected body will be the new Temple, and that the worship of God will no longer be located on mountains or in buildings. We get a bit more of his meaning in Chapter 4, when he encounters the Samaritan woman at the well, and says:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

Moses transmitted the law, of which we heard the most famous part earlier. Jews understood God primarily through the Law; today's psalm is a testament to that. The Temple was the seat of God on earth. Jesus did not displace the Law, but he did displace the Temple (which, by the way, was destroyed around 70 B.C, and never rebuilt). By juxtaposing his own flesh against the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus declares – in all four gospels – that he is the new locus of God. The Temple building and its priests and its worship cult are made irrelevant by his incarnation and resurrection. Through Jesus have come grace and truth and the Spirit - grace that we may live our lives without fear of stumbling because of sin and the law; truth that we may know God; and, finally, the indwelling Spirit, that we may hear God, and conform our lives to God's will. Through him God is made known to those whom God seeks to worship Godself. Jesus becomes the bridge, or maybe the lens, between believers and God. What remains necessary is the community of faith to listen for the voice of the Spirit together and interpret God's will. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation. We need each other.

And, with that good news laid before us, we look ahead toward Easter, not mourning our sins, but joying in the new life given us through the resurrection we remember each Easter and each and every time we feast at God's table.