



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Third Sunday of Lent

1 Corinthians 1.18-25

John 2. 13-22

Our gospel reading is generally known as 'the cleansing of the temple'. In the images of Jesus it is very rare to see him laughing, I can only think of one. It is also rare to see Jesus looking angry unless it is a depiction of this incident. I suppose his actions here could be called righteous indignation or 'Zeal for my Father's house.'

At first the gospel story is confusing. It appears in St. John's gospel in chapter two immediately after Jesus' first miracle in Cana. It is there at the very beginning of his ministry. We are not used to this, as a rule when we hear this reading it is in Holy Week. This is because in the synoptic gospels it occurs towards the very end of Jesus' life. There is only one mention of Jesus attending Passover in recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke who place it immediately after the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now call 'Palm Sunday'. We know that in a few days Jesus will be executed. In St. Mark's gospel, which is the earliest written about AD 70 it says 11.17

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.'

So everything in the gospel after that is coloured by that statement. Jesus might be popular with the people now but he is standing on a crater crust that will erupt in anger and malice very soon. This will affect our reading of the passage. It is similar in the other two synoptic gospels in that we know that Jesus' death is not far away and his actions here will further enrage the authorities.

Yet in St. John's gospel written much later AD 90-110 the feast of Passover is mentioned several times. We know that every adult Jewish male within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was required by law to attend the feast of Passover.

¹² 'After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days, ¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.'

St. John's gospel mentions Jesus being in Jerusalem many times and for several festivals. The fact that the synoptic gospels do not simply means that they tell of Jesus' life and ministry from another perspective. So what is John's aim here?

We know that John's aim is always to show the supremacy of Jesus as part of the Godhead and as Messiah. We have only to look at the way in which he begins his gospel to understand that this will be his emphasis. Facts matter, chronology not so much and the fact of the matter is that this incident did happen and that this incident would have shocked all who witnessed it.

We are so used to the various gospel stories that sometimes they can fail in their impact a bit. Just imagine the situation. I have described in other Reflections its centrality to Jewish worship. To them it symbolised the very presence of God. Think of the effect when it was destroyed by the Babylonians. The heart was torn out of the nation.

Perhaps the effect is heightened then by John having Jesus act in this way at the beginning of his ministry. His behaviour would have been hugely shocking. An itinerant upstart preacher from Galilee walking into the most holy place of the Jewish nation and wreaking havoc! People would have sat up and taken notice.

Jesus is angry why? We have seen Jesus in the temple as a tiny baby at his presentation to God. We have seen the reaction of Simeon and Anna. The presence of God was no longer in the temple, it had been sacked and the Ark of the Covenant taken. When Jesus enters the temple the living God is returning to the temple.

We have seen that the parents of Jesus are required to buy two pigeons for their sacrifice. Temple sacrifice would have been ongoing. People would be coming to the temple from all over. There were many currencies which were legal but NOT in the temple. The money used in the temple or gifted to it must be Jewish or it was unclean. Therefore people would go to the money changers in the temple precincts. The same would be true of the temple tax that each Jew over the age of nineteen was required to pay. All this was fair enough; the job had to be done but the money changers charged a hefty fee for their services thus enraging Jesus. They were in effect fleecing worshipers. People who could not afford it and who had come to worship were being cheated. Then of course there was the purchase of animals for sacrifice. Those who sold animals inside were more or less assured of having the animals passed as acceptable, those from outside not so. The animals bought inside the temple cost much more! The money changers, the dealers in animals for sacrifice were literally robbing the people who had come to worship God. No wonder Jesus was furious.

¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'

Not only was the cheating of the worshipers disgusting but the pandemonium here in the court of the gentiles, who could not proceed further, would have prevented them from worshipping.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?

There was no reverence for God among these men; they were just out to make money.

John adds the line,

¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me,’ Jesus’ words of anger are ‘Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’

The disciples would have recognised the words, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me,’ Psalm 69.9 as indicating that he was the Messiah.

The Jews of course are outraged about his actions in the temple and want to know by what right he is doing it. They would have recognised these words from the Psalm as indicating the actions of the Messiah too. Really their words mean not just why are you behaving in this way, but what sign you can give that you are the Messiah?

¹⁹Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’

The Jews who were expecting an answer indicating a proof of his Messiahship would have taken his words literally.

We know that Jesus is referring to his crucifixion and resurrection on the third day and of course John’s first readers would have understood the reference. The Jews in the temple take him literally. After Solomon’s temple was destroyed the Jews on their return from exile began rebuilding but it was Herod the Great who was responsible for the temple that Jesus would have known and after Herod’s death work continued. It was a wonderful sight; even the model I saw indicated that.

Their consternation is obvious. ²⁰The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’

Jesus’ words point to the fact that God dwells in him now, not the temple. The disciples realise what these words mean more clearly after the resurrection.

²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.’

Added to this Jesus knows that animal ritual sacrifice is not what God requires. No, God wants sincere worship. The qualities that God requires are summed up in the beatitudes. Those who ‘have clean hands and a pure heart’ Psalm 24.4 are the ones who are doing God’s will. Worship must be God centred, it must not be ritual centred or focused on material things either then or now.

Jesus by his death puts an end to sacrifice once and for all. Jesus by his death and resurrection breaks any barrier between God and his people. Those who believe in Jesus as God will inherit eternal life. Jesus at Pentecost sends his Holy Spirit to his first disciples and it is that Holy Spirit that dwells within each one of us.

²³ 'When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.'

Jesus knows that many people in Jerusalem are saying they believe in him already but he does nothing about proclaiming who he is. Why not? Fast forward to this story as told by the other three gospel writers. It is after the triumphal entry. It is after Jesus is acclaimed as 'Son of David.' The Hosannas are still ringing around. The people are proclaiming him as Messiah. A few days later they have turned into a mob and he is killed.

No, people are fickle and Jesus knows human nature. Secondly they want a Messiah on their own terms. Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry in John's gospel. He has the good news to proclaim over his three years of ministry. He has to teach people the real meaning of the cost of discipleship. They have to understand just what he comes to proclaim and they have to understand that he is part of the Godhead.

It is a huge task and even at the end of his ministry most people will have rejected him. But to use John's own words from the beginning of his gospel, ¹²'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God', he gives salvation and the promises of God. Jesus also gives the 'great commission' to, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Matthew 28.19

Why are these readings set for Lent? Well even though the 'cleansing of the temple' comes early in John's gospel what is at the centre of it is the cross. Jesus speaks of his death and resurrection in veiled terms which the disciples will understand more clearly as the event happens.

The reading from 1 Corinthians fits in very well here. I have said that at this point people would simply not have understood Jesus' way or his message let alone the road to Calvary. Just look at what Paul says.

'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,'

The focus of our gospel reading for today is the opening line. Look how he says 'Jews demand signs' and look how this links to our gospel reading 'what sign can you give us?'

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city. Not so many Jews lived there as gentiles of many nations. They would have been worshipping the many deities of Greece and Rome to say nothing of 'Emperor Worship.' Now Paul is addressing the church at Corinth. Throughout much of his letter he is telling them off about things, putting them right about behaviour and so on but here he has one aim, to stress the supremacy of Christ and the centrality of the cross and resurrection. It is important as always to look back and to put a reading in its context. Our reading today does not come far into the first chapter.

Look how Paul begins his epistle,

¹ 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,

together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Paul is inclusive here; yes the letter is addressed to the 'church of God that is in Corinth' but it is also addressed to all who believe. It is important to reiterate that the work of Jesus is worldwide, he is ruler of all that is and he heralds the new creation. Whoever is a believer in Jesus, whoever is baptised into his church, is a new person in themselves, part of a family of Christians. Too often the church can be seen as an exclusive, a kind of club, it is not; it is for all who believe in Jesus as saviour. Within the church all are equal; no one is special or more important than the other. To God we are all precious, we are all held in the palm of his hand. He knows us intimately and he loves us. At his incarnation, God in Jesus Christ entered our world. He began a new rule of love and we are his family and he has enriched us and all Christians with his strengthening gift in the Holy Spirit.

⁸'He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Being part of this new family requires new behaviour though. In the Corinthian church there were all kinds of divisions. 1 Cor. 10

'Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.'

This does not just apply to the church in Corinth it applies to any church in any age. What Paul is NOT saying is that people should tamely acquiesce with what they know to be wrong. What he is saying is that needless quarrelling or desire for power has no part in the church of Jesus Christ. What he is referring to specifically here is people making their own factions, basically preferring the teachings of a certain person.

¹²'What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? '

Obviously Paul had taken Christianity to Corinth and founded this fledgling church, but then Apollos who had been taught the Christian message himself had visited Corinth to carry on the work. So people begin to prefer the style of various teachers. Some were Paul, some for Peter, (Cephas) others saying they are for Christ. Well that kind of behaviour won't do. There must be no doubt at all that it is Christ crucified and risen that Paul is proclaiming as supreme.

Not only that, Paul makes the point about the centrality of baptism in the name of Jesus and only Jesus. Baptism means 'dying to sin and rising to Christ.' No one is baptised into any other name but that of Jesus Christ who is a member of the trinity.

'Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.'

Baptism means new life in Christ. It means we 'turn from sin and turn to Christ' then we live in that way. It demands action, just as repentance is not an end in itself. We repent we are absolved but repentance means to 'turn' once again we 'turn from sin and turn to Christ.'

Jesus Christ is ruler of all and the supremacy of Christ must be stressed. It is this passage that immediately precedes our reading and without understanding what went before it would be difficult to understand the passage set for today. Now we can see why Paul begins,

¹⁸ 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

Without the cross and resurrection there is nothing. Paul stresses that Jesus Christ died and rose and won salvation for us through the grace and power of God. This is the Christian church and Jesus Christ is the saviour and ruler of the cosmos. It is Jesus Christ who is central. People who bring the message are just that, workers for Jesus. They are not the focus. Broaden that out and nothing should be the focus but our love and worship of God. When other things get in the way of that in the life of the church or our own lives then we are out of line with what we should be focusing on.

It links back to the cleansing of the temple where ritual had replaced true worship of God, where the means had replaced the true end. The actions of the money changers, et al was hampering worship quite apart from being thoroughly dishonest. No wonder Jesus was furious.

It is a challenge for us maybe for this Lent to think to ourselves just what, if anything is getting in the way of the true worship of God, where do the means get in the way of the true end? This may be in our lives, our church, the national church or the international church. It is worth thinking about.

From reading the passage I have just quoted at the beginning of 1 Corinthians we can see that the early church was not one trouble free idyll as people sometimes think. Division, faction and power play was there right from the start. But Paul issues a warning that it has got to stop, Christian lives must be Christ centred.

The passage set for today is not easy to understand at the first reading. What we need to remember is that Paul is addressing the church in Corinth. Corinth was not simply, as I have said a cosmopolitan city. It had been rebuilt by Julius Caesar in AD 44. It thought itself a very important place and a 'Roman city on Greek soil.' Not only that but it was sophisticated, a centre of culture and intellectualism. Philosophers would have abounded and visited, 'wisdom' as the world saw it was central. These people would have spoken before crowds in great orations.

Now think of their sophisticated philosophy and put beside it the message about Jesus Christ, an itinerant preacher from a backwater of the Roman Empire who was executed by crucifixion. It was incidentally a disgrace for any Jew to be hung on a tree. Now we can see why Paul begins, 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,'

Paul actually uses a technique of public speaking here himself; that is the juxtaposition of opposites i.e. 'foolishness' and 'wisdom' and 'weakness' and 'strength.' that technique in a speech is very effective. It is still used widely today to great effect.

It might be foolishness to those who are perishing, 'but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' The centrality of God's power is put against human logic and God's power is supreme,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Isaiah 29.14

The Christian message, the good news, is not about logic. It is not logical to 'turn the other cheek'. But the message of Christ is not about putting oneself first but God first. It is not about logic or wisdom but trust and faith in Christ.

²⁰'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.'

God challenges the wisdom, pride and prowess of human behaviour with Jesus Christ and the power of God. The power of God dwarfs anything humans can aspire to.

²²'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' That is it simply. Paul does not use powerful sophisticated speeches. No, he simply proclaims Jesus Christ as ruler and king, saviour of humanity.

He is simply saying, 'taste and see that the Lord is good.' For those who do accept Jesus will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who live in his way and give themselves wholeheartedly to him will have their lives turned upside down by the power of God. Jesus Christ transforms individuals and communities if we let him in. The outward sophistication, power, and materialism of the world are not central. These things are things a Christian needs to turn their back on otherwise, like in the money changers' antics in the temple; it is likely they will get in the way of true worship of God, get in the way of us really being Christ centred not world centred.

Christians are in the world not of it in this sense. That does not mean we go around with our heads in the clouds. Jesus and Paul lived their lives at the sharp end. Jesus was concerned with people and was to be found in the tough places. In our own lives, our own churches and worship we must be Christ centred. Paul simply says the power of God to fill and transform lives is stronger than anything else there is. When anything gets in the way of living as Jesus teaches, whatever that might be, we need to overturn it as Jesus did in the temple.

'All your commands I know are true, your many gifts will make me new. Into our lives your power breaks through, living Lord.' Patrick Appleford.

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