



Third Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 7 March 2021

READINGS

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Jesus, a catalyst for change

Last Sunday Jesus told us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And as we learnt from Fr Matthew’s sermon, that is really all that is recommended to those who are seeking meaning for their life! An invitation to come as we are and let Christ conquer our constructed or imagined selves, so we can be remade, reborn in the image of God.

This week, in the Gospel of John we encounter Jesus cleansing the temple and it is a bit scary – because, the nice Jesus we have domesticated - the one about whom we learnt from Sunday school with a serene, gentle face, long flowy hair and pointy nose –doesn’t play nice. In the Gospel of John, He is over-the-top, angry, and turns over tables and whips money changers into shape. He is an unpredictable and fearsome Lord, who will not be tampered with or pacified with some clever economic gimmicks at the expense of true worship.

It is interesting that in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple comes much later in the story, just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Which is understandably, what drives his opponents mad with anger to the point of plotting his death. In the Gospel of John, however, the story is right near the beginning, after changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, then bursting onto the public scene by driving everything and everyone out of the Temple and overturning the tables of the money changers.

The Temple is to be a place of worship, not profiteering – and while profit has its place in economics, it should be governed by ethics which promote the well-being of all human beings and not foster exploitation. “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” Jesus exclaims. The temple was intended to be a place of prayer and devotion. The temple authorities in Jesus’ day attempted to capitalize on that devotion, to make money by exchanging currency.

This story a very familiar one, but a rather uncomfortable one to speak of. In this story Jesus was issuing a challenge when he drove the business people out of the Temple. Some people like to see this as Jesus attempting to rid the faith of the Jews of the corruption which had crept into it over the centuries. The Temple had gradually become an industry, attracting traders of all kinds, selling animals for sacrifice, and other commodities.

What can we learn, during this Lenten period, from the theme of Jesus in the Temple? I remember visiting a Cathedral, overseas and found it to be a hype of activity: tour guides, gift sellers and people demanding money for the privilege of praying or admiring God's house – I understand that they need the money to maintain the buildings. But it was still odd to see this kind of "trading" going on the Church.

Here is one useful guide on how we might interpret the scene in the Temple. The Temple can be seen as representing all large institutions, perhaps even our modern Church. They are often beautiful, and revered, but can become confused and corrupted, they can be filled up with increasing traditions and practices which need reassessing and cleansing from time to time.

The figure of Jesus in this story, is that of a catalyst for change: an energetic, dynamic leader who changed the world. This is not a comfortable Jesus, meek and mild, ministering to the needy. Here Jesus is resolute, determined to do what is right, even at the financial and emotional cost of some people. This is a difficult aspect of Jesus but one which we should not attempt to ignore. This is the Jesus who demands that we take a stand against injustice, the Jesus who has inspired women and men to fight against slavery, against apartheid, against all injustice, against suffering and disease. Unless the people of faith embody Jesus' righteous anger against what is wrong with the world, ours will become a dead religion, full of ritual but devoid of bold proclamation and promise that God is with us and is for us in our human need.

Lent is a time to listen to what our hearts tell us might need to be changed, in ourselves and in the world. To the people of Jesus' time, such an attack on the Temple was shocking: many were probably disturbed and disgusted; many probably couldn't see the point of Jesus' actions. Those who seek change and renewal always shock most of their social groups. Jesus interrupted worship for the sake of justice. He moved from compassion to righteous anger to decisive action, because he would not stand for the violation of the place of worship. He would not tolerate any version of unfairness and cruelty towards the most vulnerable and poor people in his society.

May we be the Body of Christ, the true Temple that becomes a place of grace, compassion and acceptance.

I would like to conclude with a few questions for further reflection:

1. How comfortable are we with an angry Jesus ?
2. How is Jesus still challenging those who believe in Him today?
3. How is God challenging the Church today towards change?
4. What do we think might make Jesus furious in our time?