

John 2:13-22 (NRSV)

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making 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. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After 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.

Here, as last week, we are presented with a picture of a passionate Jesus – a man gives vent to some very human emotions... a man who assaults people... making a whip from cords ... driving the animals out ... pouring

out coins ... overturning tables.... shouting. This is not so much the Lamb of God but the Lion of Judah ... roaring in his righteous anger. But why ... what is it about this moment that inspires such a strong emotional outburst.

Well let's set the scene a little. First of all when does this scene take place?

During Passover. That most sacred of all Jewish holidays -- the remembrance of that horrible night when the angel of death passed over the household of the Jews ... but stopped within the households of the Egyptians to pluck from their family every firstborn male. That is what this day is ... a day of thanksgiving for being spared that pain ... a day of thanksgiving to celebrate the freedom as God empowered their leader Moses to free them from the bondage of slavery ... but mindful of the horrible human price that was paid.

That brings us to the setting of this scene -- for because this is such a sacred holiday, all male Jews were required by Mosaic law to travel from wherever they may live to the Temple in Jerusalem. And there to make sacrifice.

That is the setting of this passage – the most sacred day ... the most sacred place. Yet what Jesus found ... what we find is not a time and place of reverence and solemnity --- but chaos! Ugly, frantic, loud, chaos.

Just imagine, these travellers have made their journeys from lands as far away as North Africa or Germany. 10s of 100s have gathered ... all with the same intent – to make their dutiful, faithful sacrifice to God. But, very few of them would have brought their sacrificial animals on their journey. For animals worthy of sacrifice must be without blemish. Better to wait and buy the animals once you arrive. But in order to buy in Jerusalem, you have to have the right currency. The currency of Spain may be no good there. But not to worry – some entrepreneurs have set up money exchanges right within the walls of the Temple itself. And, how fortunate, so have vendors of cattle, sheep, turtledoves. One stop shopping as it were. Change your money, buy your sheep, then lead it right over to the priest who will sacrifice it --- as its blood merges with the rivers of blood from the other 10s of 100s of sacrifices.

So imagine the scene if you can. Literally thousands of Jewish pilgrims have arrived for Passover at the temple. All of them trying to secure the

necessary animal to sacrifice according to ancient law. And then we have the opportunistic money traders and merchants right within the outer walls of the temple itself – hawking their wares – trying to make a profit off of what was supposed to be one of the most sacred and holy occasions in the Jewish year. It is the scene of chaos – the smell of blood – the sound of animals in their death throes – the sound of merchants shouting out their prices... thousands of tired, dusty travelers jostle together. Can you imagine a scene less worshipful ... less divine?

This then is what provokes Jesus. The fact that this day, which was supposed to have been a worshipful celebration of God's love – a remembrance of his freeing his people from the burden of slavery – this day of all days had become a circus. It was no longer a moment of worship, but had instead become an opportunity for commerce – for profit. The temple, and the day had been desecrated. They had lost sight of the divinity of that day and that place.

His physical outburst tells us the depth of his rage and frustration. The witnesses to his outburst ask him who does he think he is chasing off these people? He responds by saying ... by challenging them – “destroy this

temple, and I will build it up again in three days.” Those listening respond with disbelief! Can’t you just hear in their voices a dismissive attitude – they probably thought he was mad, insane. The temple was not merely building. It was entire complex – originally built by Solomon. And not only was a huge, but it was the center of Jewish religious worship. The center of the temple was the holy of the holies. The place where God was encountered face-to-face by humanity. And yet he speaks of destroying this huge and sacred house of God and building it back up in three days. How can this be? It was humanly impossible.

But of course, it was not until after his death and his resurrection that they really understood his words. He was not talking about the Temple of Jerusalem He was talking about his body. For according to Jewish tradition, God may have an inhabited the inner sanctum of the Temple of Jerusalem... but for the followers of Christ ... God inhabited the human body of Jesus of Nazareth. That is who Christ was – the divine and human together. And all Temples – those places where the divine and the human intersect – they should be treated with respect, awe, and reverence.

But we don't have either of the two temples left here that are mentioned in this passage. The Temple in Jerusalem was finally an utterly destroyed in 70 AD, when the Jews try to rise against the Romans. Nor of course do we have the human body of Christ among us – we know that that Temple was built up again after three days, but it is no longer here amongst us – it is instead seated at the right hand of the father. So where does that leave us – what does this passage speak to us who have neither Temples?

Oh, but, we do have other temples. If we except that a temple is a that place where the human and the divine come together - physical location touched by the divine, then we have temples all around us. For God is the great Creator – his touch created all – his breath breathed life into every living creature - His word formed the creation we know. Surely, then all we know is touched by the divine – the entire creation is a temple – that should be treated with respect and reverence.

And how have we done – how have we treated this Temple ... this great creation that we have been given. Have we been like those moneychangers – looking to exploit the earth looking for our advantage? Or do we see the divinity in the transcendence of its beauty. Have we lost sight of the real

purpose of the earth? Was it created for our use? Or was it created as a standing monument to the love and grace of God?

But nature is not the only Temple amongst us. We are all, are we not temples to God. We are after all, part God's creation. We have within each one of us some spark of the divine. That part of us, which seeks light, beauty, love, God. This is the touch of our Creator on us... in us. And therefore, our bodies are temples --- places where the human and the divine meet. How do we treat these temples? Do we treat them as a temple – with the reverence and awe they deserve – or do we forget that God formed us, breezed breath into these nostrils and gave us life. Do we forget the intimate contact between him and us?

Therefore let us all clean house as Jesus did. And let us rid temples of the exploitative and the abusers. Let us treat all temples with the reverence and all the fitting that place where God and humanity touch. We have lost the Temple in Jerusalem. We have lost a physical presence of our Savior. Let us not lose those temples left in our care.