Sermon for 6th in Lent Year A

Readings: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 56: 3-8; Matthew 21:1-17

i

When Jesus overturned the tables in the temple and upset those selling doves, it wasn’t because Jesus had lost his temper. Yes, he was angry; but his actions were not brought on by a sudden fit of rage. They were premeditated and carefully considered symbolic actions. Jesus had spoken several times as he approached Jerusalem of his impending death. This episode in the temple was part of a plan which Jesus expected would precipitate his death which he knew was already being planned. John tells us Jesus plaited a cord or whip (John 2:15) before setting about them. That supports the idea that Jesus calmly premeditated this confrontation. What message did he hope to give?

We often refer to this episode as ‘the cleansing of the temple’, but perhaps a more accurate description would be the ‘stopping of the temple’; for a short while at least the daily activity of offering sacrifices in the temple was disrupted and brought to a temporary halt.

This was a symbolic action. It was prophetic in the sense that it illustrated Jesus’ claim that the way the nation was heading would lead inevitably to the utter destruction and irredeemable closure of the temple. They must forsake their desire for a warrior Messiah to lead the rebellion against Rome, for that would lead only to the temple’s final closure. The people must follow the true Messiah, the Shepherd –King, the man of peace from Nazareth in Galilee.

Jesus told a parable about the man who built his house upon the sand and the man who built his house upon the rock. To build upon the vain, wild hopes of nationalist insurrection and victory over Rome was to build a house, or temple which Jesus calls a ‘house of prayer’ (Matthew 21:13), on sand. When the inevitable storm broke, the house would come crashing down.

To build the house on rock was to build upon the one true foundation which is Jesus Christ and upon his symbolically named leader of the New Israel, Peter the Rock. Such a house of prayer can withstand any storm.

In AD70 Jesus’ prophecy was fulfilled. The nation did not turn to Christ, they crucified him instead. When the zealot party provoked rebellion against Rome in the first of three Jewish-Roman wars the temple was destroyed, leaving behind only the Wailing Wall we know today.

ii

Stopping the temple sacrifices was not just a prophetic warning of approaching doom for the temple and the nation; it also had a more immediate reference.

The temple was working flat out; it was gearing itself up for its biggest day of the year, Passover. People were flocking into the city from across the ancient world to celebrate the festival. Jesus’ arrival on Palm Sunday would have aroused fear and curiosity among the visitors to Jerusalem as well as among the residents. Many of the visitors would still be around six weeks later for the Pentecost festival when Peter addresses pilgrims from around the Eastern Europe and North Africa in Acts 2.

During Passover the temple could expect to sacrifice about one quarter of a million lambs, according to the contemporary historian, Josephus. There is no more significant time Jesus could have brought the temple to a halt. Jesus is making a personal statement.

He quotes Isaiah 56: a passage that marks the high hopes of the return from Exile. Isaiah 56:7 “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” I have taken the liberty of adding Isaiah 56:3-8 to today’s lectionary readings because I feel it is so illuminating for Palm Sunday.

This chapter of Isaiah states that foreigners who keep the Sabbath will be brought to the holy mountain and be given joy in the house of prayer - and so when Jesus is clearing away the tables of the temple merchants which have set up in the Court of Gentiles, Jesus is re-establishing the rights of access and welcome to the gentiles.

When Jesus leads a rag-a-muffin crowd of his cheering supporters into the temple precincts he is no doubt establishing access and welcome once more to those who would have been excluded under the Law. Deuteronomy 23:1 barred eunuchs from entering the house of the Lord. Isaiah 56 says that God will one day welcome eunuchs to the temple (v4). All manner of people would have swept into the temple in the cheering band of supporters behind Jesus. In Acts 8 we have a story of an Ethiopian eunuch being admitted to the Church.

So we have in this passage an example of those occasions when the gospel writer places a line of a Psalm or OT prophecy on the lips of Jesus and the reader is to understand that the quotation is supposed to be taken to refer to the whole passage from which it comes. Another example of this would be when Jesus quotes Psalm 22 during the crucifixion. The cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” is the first verse of Psalm 22 which moves through the agony of doubt to a powerful affirmation of faith:

For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help (v24)… Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn – for he has done it (v31).

So Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 56 in referring to the temple as a house of prayer is a statement that Jesus has come to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah to establish the global promise first made to Abraham in Genesis 12 that he would be a blessing to all nations of the earth.

Jesus is making a Messianic claim in fulfilling Isaiah 56.

iii

He is making a further statement by bringing the sacrifices to a halt. Jesus is about to render all temple sacrifices superfluous because he is about to offer himself as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This temporary stop in the temple ritual is a prophetic sign that the end of the temple itself is approaching. As we have seen this can be interpreted on both the political and theological level. Politically, the temple would be finished if the Jews continued to search for a military Messiah to lead a rebellion against Rome. Theologically, the temple would be brought to an end because Jesus was to supply the one perfect sacrifice to expiate the sins of the world.

But the end of the physical temple in Jerusalem was just part of the message. We recall that Jesus also proclaimed that in 3 days he would replace or rebuild it (John 2:19).

This is not in fact the end of the temple, but the time of its transformation. In the spiritual Body of Christ, the temple is made universally present and open to all those who wish to worship God in Spirit and in truth. There are no barriers, as Paul explains to the Galatians (Galatians 3:28), based on gender, ethnicity or social status. Wherever two or three come together, there Jesus, the Great High Priest shall be present among them. For Jesus is the new temple for all the world and for all time to come.

Perhaps you will see why I suggest that calling this episode the ‘cleansing of the temple’ is too small a designation: It is more the announcement of the imminent death of the temple and the creation of a new, eternal house of the Lord.

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