

Lent 3 2018 John 2: 13-22

I wonder what picture we have of the man Jesus? What sort of a man do we think he was?

I remember well the stamps I used to get, as a child, to stick into my Sunday School album. Jesus was always portrayed as a white man with blonde hair, blue eyes and a wispy blonde beard. Indeed, if you look at a crucifixion scene in one of the stained-glass windows of St Mary's, that is what you will see.

If we believe in the Incarnate Jesus, the child of Joseph and Mary, we are probably looking at an olive skinned middle-eastern male with brown eyes and a shock of dark hair and a dark beard.

And what was he like? Was he an ethereal figure floating through the Holy Land? Was he the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child" figure of the past or was he a lot more dynamic than he is described in the gospels?

Perhaps today's gospel gives us something of an insight into the reality of Jesus. Some people call it the "temple tantrum." while others refer to it as the "cleansing of the temple." Anyone who knows anything about Jesus, whether from books, movies, or other sources, seems to know at least this one incident, in which Jesus turns over tables full of coins and chases away animals. Most historians agree that an actual occurrence lies behind this story in the Gospels. But beyond that, there is a lot of disagreement. When did the event occur? And what motivated Jesus to drive money changers and sellers of animals out of the temple courts?

The Gospel of John places the story of Jesus' action in the temple toward the beginning of Jesus' public activity, while the other Gospels place it toward the end. This might seem like a simple case of three against one, and thus easily settled. In actuality, since Matthew and Luke follow Mark's structure, it is a case of Mark versus John. And since Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels only narrate one visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, they could not have placed the event earlier without changing that framework. Nevertheless, most historians follow Mark's placement, with the Romans taking an interest in Jesus as a result, setting in motion the events that lead to his arrest and crucifixion. Passover, with its focus on liberation from foreign oppression, had been the occasion of disturbances in the past. So even a small-scale symbolic action in the temple, as this must have been, would have attracted their attention.

Did Jesus lose his temper, as the phrase *temple tantrum* might suggest? Both the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Mark depict not a sudden rash outburst but

something carefully planned. In John's version, Jesus actually takes the time to make a whip from cords.

If calling it a temple tantrum gives the wrong impression, does "the cleansing of the temple" get closer to the meaning of the incident? If the selling of animals occurred anywhere within the temple precincts, it would have been in the outer court called the Court of the Gentiles. Animals leave behind messy droppings, and dung was considered to defile sacred space. But some may have thought that the presence of Gentiles, viewed as inherently unclean, was no more and no less defiling than the presence of animal dung. Jesus, on the other hand, is depicted as touching and dining with the ritually unclean, and he may therefore have objected both to the implied slight toward non-Jews and to the disrespect for their space of worship that was involved in holding commercial activities in the Court of the Gentiles. These can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, rather than as completely distinct concerns, for Jesus.

We should not think that the presence of noisy animals and commerce bothered Jesus just because they spoiled the worshipful atmosphere. An ancient temple was not supposed to be like a quiet cathedral. It was loud and bustling. The sale of animals was essential for the temple's main function as a place for the offering of animal sacrifices. Bringing an animal from one's home risked something happening to it on the way, and so many chose to sell their own animal, bring the money with them, and then purchase a replacement in Jerusalem. The money changers were there to convert various currencies into one standard coinage, the Tyrian shekel, that was used for the payment of the annual temple tax. Both the selling of animals for sacrifices and the payment of the temple tax were activities required by Jewish law and central to the temple's functions.

Because Jesus drove out people and animals that were essential, many scholars view his action not as a cleansing of the temple but as a symbolic act predicting its destruction. This puts Jesus in line with the actions of Israel's earlier prophets and agrees with the words that John 2:19 has Jesus utter on this occasion: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus seems to have envisaged that the temple would be removed to make room for whatever more perfect state of affairs would replace it in the kingdom of God.

Keith Ward, an Emeritus Professor of Divinity at Oxford has written;

"Jesus ate with social outcasts, healed the sick, gave hope to the poor and needy and forgave sinners. The only people he treated harshly were the religious. He drove the animals out of the Temple with a whip, overturned the tables of the

money changers, and poured out their coins. He lashed the Pharisees and the lawyers with his tongue, accusing them of breaking their own law by their hypocrisy, pride and manipulation. He said he had come not to save the righteous but those who were regarded with contempt and indifference.

It is rather ironic that we have constructed a religion around Jesus, that many have become financially rich through religion and that we have hierarchies of clergy in prominent seats and costly clothing. What can we do about it? Jesus did not want to destroy the Temple, but he subtly pointed out that his body was a temple that would be destroyed and raised again. When it was raised, the Body of Christ would be the community of those who feed the hungry, heal the sick and comfort the bereaved, the hands and heart of the Risen Christ.

Whatever the outward reality, it is when we are in Christ's body, living as he lived, living in him, that we are truly the House of God". Amen.