

Lent 3 7th March 2021

John 2:13-22

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Nonviolence and the cleansing of the temple

Because we are in the season of Lent, the readings start to focus our attention on the upcoming passion of God – the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. Last week, from Mark's gospel we heard Jesus say, 'those who wish to save their life must lose it'....'pick up your cross and follow me'...that is, follow where the call of God's love in your life takes you and be willing to pay the price for that where necessary.

Today we leap over into John's gospel – the 2nd chapter - to this story of Jesus going up to the Temple for the Passover.

John's gospel is absolutely loaded with symbolism. Every detail is important to pay attention to. Today I want to draw attention to THREE important details that John uses, all of which will repeat late in the gospel. It's a bit like when we go to an opera and the orchestra plays an overture right while we are waiting for the actors to come on stage – giving us hints of what is come. John's main overture is the prologue in John 1:1-14. But we are also getting some hints here in Chapter 2. So let's here some of these three details:

- (i) Firstly - the Jerusalem temple is a huge theme in John. Jesus will visit the temple several times and each time his visit is associated with one of the main Jewish festivals. In this first visit it's the Passover Festival. The Passover festival is the great festival of liberation which revisits the story of the Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt Jesus is ultimately going to be crucified at the Passover festival. **The hint we are being given here in Chapter 2 is that Jesus' ministry will culminate in a great story of liberation from slavery, not just for the Jewish people, but for the whole cosmos.**

- (ii) Secondly, in this cleaning of the temple, Jesus is making a powerful prophetic critique of what the temple has become. And it's not the first time such a critique has been made. In using the words, '*you have made this place a den of robbers*', any Jewish listener would be reminded of Jeremiah 7. Jeremiah basically says (paraphrasing), '*when I led you out of Egypt, I never said anything to you about sacrificing animals. I don't need that stuff. What I need from you is mercy and justice – and what did I find? I find you oppressing refugees, orphans, widows, and murdering people – you've turned this temple into a den of robbers – and you arrogantly think that your religious sacrifices will protect you. It's not going to happen – this whole structure is going to be torn down* (which is what happens when the Babylonians invade Jerusalem and destroy the temple and exiles the people for 70 years.

Jesus is making a prediction that what Jeremiah correctly said would happen hundreds of years earlier is happening again. And sure enough, in 70 AD the Romans roll into town and raze the 2nd temple to the ground. The physical Jerusalem temple which is torn down is now replaced by the temple of Jesus' body. We will hear later in John's gospel how Jesus sees the human being as now being the temple of God's spirit (John 15:1-6).

St Paul will say the same thing, 1 Cor 6:19 – ‘you are the temple of the Holy Spirit’ (also Romans 8:11)

- (iii) Thirdly, there is subtle but very important pointer to something else when the disciples cite the verse from the Psalms, (Psalm 69:9) that ‘*zeal for your house will consume me*’.

It’s often interpreted that Jesus has just demonstrated *zeal* for the temple by driving out the animals and overturning the money tables. But it’s much more likely that what’s being alluded to here is that it is religious zeal which is the problem rather than the solution. The religious zeal being referred to here is not Jesus’s zeal, but the religious zeal of the temple authorities which will result in Jesus being put to death (that is, being ‘consumed’). To get this we have to remember how the Jews conceived of religious zeal.

Religious zeal was talked about in relation to a story in the book of Numbers (25.10ff) where there is story about a guy calls Phineas. In that story, the Israelites are getting caught up in idolatry (as they did with monotonous regularity) so God sends a plague on them. Moses says to the judges of Israel, each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor” (25.5).

This of situation of sickness and community instability lend itself perfectly to the search for a scapegoat. The person who cops it is an Israelite by the name of Zimir who is sleeping with a Midianite woman, Cozbi, (‘sleeping with the enemy so to speak. So a guy called Phineas goes into their tent and runs them both through with a spear presumably in the act of ‘having it off.

God’s response to this is to complement Phineas:

10 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 11 “Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such ***zeal*** among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. 12 Therefore say, ‘I hereby grant him my *covenant of peace*. 13 It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a ***covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.***”

Through this brutal act of scapegoating, Phineas becomes, for Israel, an archetypal man of faith through whom God grants a covenant of peace (ie God stops the plague and unifies the people and helps them to be successful in battle - which are classic manifestations of the social-cohesion benefits of scapegoating).

Noting that Phineas is also the grandson of Aaron the High Priest (Exodus 6.23-25), what is being foreshadowed here is that Jesus will become a victim of scapegoating violence initiated by a high priest, who says, ‘do you know that it is expedient that one man dies for the sake of the nation’.

Right here, in a single line in John 2, the hint is being planted that Jesus will reverse the whole violent, theologically justified scapegoating mechanism often associated with violence religious zeal. The sacrifice of atonement which *Jesus* makes, which establishes the *true* covenant of peace, is not a replication of the violence of Phineas, but is its reversal. The covenant of perpetual peace which Jesus establishes comes about because Jesus becomes the scapegoated one, rather than the scapegoater. Jesus will be killed BY religious zeal rather than being a man who enacts religious zeal on others.

In David Bentley Hart’s translation of the New Testament undermines the common suggestion that Jesus is being violent in the temple. Even the NRSV is misleading in suggesting that Jesus drives out the traders using a whip. David Bentley Hart’s

translation makes it clear that Jesus fashions a 'stockwhip' out of chords to herd the sheep and oxen out of the temple (and thereby save their lives) – not to thrash human beings. Jesus is prophetically acting against the temple system – he is not being physically violent to people]

So....there is a lot here in these first verses. John is setting up a trajectory for the story. From the very beginning, Jesus is on a path which heads to Jerusalem, to speak the prophetic truth, to recall his own tradition to justice and mercy rather than animal sacrifice, to initiate peace not be violent scapegoating like Phineas, but through nonviolent self sacrifice out of love for the world.

The whole religious infrastructure of the temple system is being to be replaced, not be a bigger and better temple, but by a temple made of flesh. WE now become the dwelling place of God – temples of the Holy Spirit!

What does it mean to you to think of yourself as so loved by God that God has chosen you to be God's dwelling place on earth?