

Lent 3, Year B

Psalm 19

Exodus 20: 1-17

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

John 2: 13-22

Today's Gospel records an act of violence. Jesus goes into the temple and upsets the money-changers' tables. He drives the cattle and sheep out with a whip, along with the people who sold them. Away with the caged pigeons. This is the only violent act of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. There is a well-established tradition in the church that Jesus was nice, mild, and there is a well-established expectation that parish clergy should also be nice, mild, and so many Church goers find it shocking that the Prince of Peace can be violent.

In the news this week was a report of parents found guilty in Dublin of child neglect to an appalling degree, and abuse. There was the report of a couple who had subjected their sister to a sustained programme of cruelty, eventually killing her, because they believed her to have been possessed by the devil. And there was a multimillionaire gentleman spending 250K on a bar bill for one night. It's not surprising that people get angry. It's not surprising that they turn to violence in frustration.

I wonder if Jesus was frustrated by what he saw in the Temple courtyard. Whether the violence in today's Gospel was an act of frustration, it was certainly a prophetic act. The authorities must have realised this, for they did not get Jesus arrested, or arrange for Jesus to get beaten up by the security. They asked 'What sign can you show us?'

The cleansing of the temple is in itself a sign of things to come, and as we think about it, we might see that it works on several levels.

There were three parts to the temple, the innermost courtyard for Jewish men, then the courtyard for women, and outermost, the courtyard of the Gentiles, the non-Jews. This merchandising occupied at least part of the courtyard of the Gentiles. By throwing the merchants out, Jesus was restoring this courtyard for the use of the Gentiles, and getting rid of the people who were trying to fleece them.

The authorities who permitted the merchandising in the temple would have justified it as helping people worship properly. The money-changers changed money out of coins with the images of pagan gods into religiously neutral coinage. The cattle and sheep on sale were unblemished, fit for sacrifice in Temple worship. The pigeon-sellers would have enabled poorer visitors, unable to afford cattle and sheep, an opportunity of participating in the sacrificial round of worship.

It has been suggested that merchandising in the temple was a very recent innovation, operated by friends of the high priest to their (and probably his) financial advantage. The corruption of Caiaphas, the High Priest, was notorious. The merchants who had previously operated outside the temple in the city market-place were therefore marginalised, as Caiaphas and his cronies ran this scam in the Temple to their own benefit, while pretending to be assisting worship. This may help to explain why the authorities did not arrest Jesus—if they had, it would have exposed their hypocrisy to the world.

So Jesus may have been symbolically clearing up what was widely perceived as a corrupt business practice and restoring a more equitable business culture. We may well feel that the contemporary business and economic culture needs reform, so the poor and vulnerable are properly cared for, and that financial integrity is prized over gambling. The Church has constantly called for justice and solidarity in both national and international economic relations. And at a time when the Church of Ireland is tearing itself asunder about sexuality, it does well to remember that Scripture says a great deal about financial ethics, and very little about sex.

However, the cleansing of the temple is about more than correcting corrupt business practices. It is about allowing non-Jews to worship along with Jews. The psalms in particular express the great hope that the temple would be for the whole world. This was one of the great expectations of the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour of God's people, so that all people would worship the one true God. Symbolically Jesus cleanses the temple and allows Gentiles into their courtyard to worship. Remember that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was rent in two – that is, the veil that separated the part reserved for the High Priest from the parts for everyone else, so now everyone has access to the source of wisdom and holiness.

'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up,' Jesus says. The temple authorities think that he is talking of the building, and indeed for forty-six years the restoration work had been going on. But the message is not about the building, rather it is about the resurrection on the third day.

The Jerusalem temple then symbolises the body of Christ himself—the Church—us. From the body of Jesus hanging on the cross came out blood and water, symbolising baptism through which we as individuals, men and women, become part of the body of Jesus. The blood and water also symbolise the Eucharist by which we are sustained in grace. The true temple of God is not any building, however beautiful, however ancient, however long and expensive it has been to build, and whatever it means to us. The true temple of God is God's holy people, you and me. In Lent we are asked to take stock of where we are and how we act so that we can once again turn, and be worthy of membership.