



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Lent 3
Year B**

Resisting the Idolatry of the Age

[RCL] Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

In this age, when Mammon is worshipped gleefully in the public realm of both politics and of what passes for popular religion, it is bracing to read St. John's depiction of Jesus' visit to the Temple, to his "Father's house," as he called it. It makes us cry aloud, "Oh, for a whip of justice to clean out the corruption in our own temples of power." Yet, we know that only Jesus has the courage and the authority to do so. All we are able to do is wait and repeat, "How long oh Lord, how long?"

For Jesus, it is the first Passover of his public ministry and his first known visit to Jerusalem as a grown man. This is uniquely St. John's chronology of the event; no less an authority than Archbishop William Temple declares that it is the correct one (the other gospels put this visit just before his arrest and crucifixion). The Archbishop makes it clear that early in his ministry, Jesus still considers the Herodian Temple his "Father's House." But by the end of his ministry, when he weeps over Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it," he declares it to be the people's temple. "See, your house is left to you," he cries, and the implication of desolation is in his words.

The Temple was finally finished in A.D. 64 only to be destroyed six years later. By then Jesus' resurrected body was the temple he was talking about in his prophecy. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Later the sycophants of the high priests will force witnesses to accuse Jesus of saying that he himself would destroy the temple, but as false witnesses do, they lied. It was not he who destroyed the temple; it was human arrogance and sin.

Why did Jesus become so angry when he saw his father's house being made into a marketplace? The Old Testament lesson gives us many clues to the answer. Idolatry of any kind was forbidden by God. The money changers had the following purpose: taxes had to be paid to the Roman overlords, but the Roman money carried the image of Caesar on it. The High Priests, considering this image idolatry, had ordered that the money paid in taxes should be converted to the shekel in order to be acceptable for Temple business. In that exchange, a great profit went into the coffers of these same priests. Jesus knew that this was both profanity of the Temple and exploitation of the poor citizens. It was another form of idolatry, but this time the idol was Mammon, a god ever present both then and now—a god not named by his followers but worshipped nonetheless.

Jesus also knew that his acts in the courtyard of the Temple would bring him in direct conflict with these same high priests, but fear was unknown to him; nothing ever stopped him from obeying the will of his Father. This early in his ministry he is very popular with the people, so the priests don't dare touch him. As

his interpretation of who God is and what God demands of us continues throughout the land, he becomes a stumbling block to the high priests, and the people, not getting the signs that they demand, agree to his death. But on this first Passover in Jerusalem, filled with the Holy Spirit, he burns with the fire and power of Truth. Afraid of that fire, they don't dare touch him, but their desire to see him dead begins on that day.

In a few years St. Paul will articulate it very clearly to the Corinthians. The Jews, Jesus' and Paul's own people, were scandalized by Jesus' courage, by his claim to know the mind of his father, by his willingness to meet his death without any retaliation or violence. To the Gentiles, with whom Paul is sharing what he learned from Christ, all this is foolishness. It goes against their own admiration for wisdom and philosophy, even for courage in battle. St. Paul summarizes the reaction to the acts of Jesus in brilliant brevity: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

In today's gospel story, St. John shows the scandalous activity of Jesus in all its glory. The leaders of the Jews had fooled the people with a piety that had become idolatry and had allowed physical structures to take the place of a God who demanded, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." Our culture has forgotten this command also, and so many signs or symbols have been turned into idols: the Ten Commandments are not obeyed, but their depiction on stone is approved; the flag that is supposed to remind us of the human longing for freedom becomes an idol to be worshipped at athletic games; money that should be used to educate and feed children becomes an idolatrous acquisition for those who already have too much of it, while our streets fill with homeless people; and other, old symbols of the evil of violence return to trouble our dreams.

We need Jesus' courage to cleanse the temples of idolatry. We long for his kind of integrity that dares to call out the oppressors, no matter who they are. We pray for the power to overthrow the tables of the moneychangers who cheat the poor and the voiceless. In St. Paul's words, we too must "proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Nowhere does Paul ever speak of a prosperity gospel.

As we approach Holy Week, we need the love and the passion that can sustain us even unto death. We will be laughed at when we too resist the culture of the day, but we will remember with St. Paul that, "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Let us be aware, more than ever during this season of Lent, that the power of God goes with us.

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