



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

Lent 3

After gathering and welcome, draw the group together with prayer:

Almighty God, in your amazing love for humanity, you sent your Son Jesus to live and walk among us, to experience pain and death and incredibly, to destroy death forever: Grant that we might come to understand the road that led to his suffering and death and strengthen each of us, that we might have the courage to truly be followers of his way, his truth and his life, standing firm in what we know to be right and challenging those things in our community

and culture that tear down, oppress and destroy the human spirit. All this we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before beginning this week's study, once again it might be of some benefit to briefly recap last week's focus and findings, inviting the participants to share any thoughts they might have.

Then, invite a participant to read the following passage. Allow some silence for reflection and then have the passage read again, in a different voice and, if possible, in a different translation.

John 2:13–22

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

By this point in the Lenten series, the participants will probably have developed a reasonable comfort level in sharing thoughts in small groups (profound apologies to extreme introverts). So it might be interesting to stretch them a bit. In small groups, have the participants discuss the following questions—allow 10 to 15 minutes.

- 1) Describe this seemingly outrageous scene from the standpoint of a) an onlooker, perhaps a pilgrim in the city for Passover; b) one of the religious authorities, a scribe or a priest; or c) one of the disciples.
- 2) This scene bears little resemblance to our Sunday school image of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. What seems to be going on here? What stands out for you?

As always, record any insights or challenges that emerge.

Note: Far more is at play here than concern about the selling of animals or the exchange of money in the temple. Indeed, while often we read commentary about graft and corruption on the part of the money-changers and those who sold animals for sacrifice, there is no historic evidence to back that claim. The types of commerce described had a long, established place in the life of the temple and of the people. Therefore, following the period of reporting back, any conversation about this passage will benefit greatly from some historical and literary contextual input.

Teaching Moment

Gerald West, professor, scholar and theologian, writes:

A socio-historical understanding of the temple recognises that the temple ordered/structured the religious, social, political, and economic life of Israel. That the temple was not a religious institution only is useful information for most participants, particularly as they have begun to recognize, from their own "close" reading of the text, that something more complex is "going on" in the temple. First, the temple ordered each person's status and social location in the social order. The outer walls of the temple identified the holy people, Israel, setting this people aside from all others. Within the temple there was a separate court for women, men, priests, and then the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest entered once a year. Significantly, the sick, the maimed and mutilated, the mentally and physically disabled, and "unclean" women were excluded from temple worship.

Second, the temple ordered time through its annual cycle of festivals, including, for example,

the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths, Passover, Pentecost, and many more. And, as we will see, these festivals were integral to the economic functions of the temple. Third, the temple ordered the political life of Israel. After the Roman procurator, the High Priest was the most powerful individual in Roman occupied Palestine. The High Priest controlled the governing body of the temple and the high council of the Sanhedrin. The 70 members of the Sanhedrin (a sort of parliament under the Roman procurators) were drawn largely from the chief priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes—all of whom were closely connected with the temple. Members of the Sanhedrin were also drawn from the Jewish secular aristocracy—the elders and the Herodians. So the groups mentioned in Mark are not just religious figures; they are clearly political figures too. Furthermore, there are additional political dimensions to the relationships between the temple and its leadership and Roman imperial power. The Roman procurators, when resident in Jerusalem, were quartered, together with their military troops, in the fortress of Antonia, which looked down on the temple court from the north-west corner; furthermore, the fortress Antonia also housed the high priestly vestments, a sign of Rome's control and the subjection and collaboration entailed in the appointment of the High Priest.

Finally, the temple ordered the economic life of Israel. In fact, the only groups that were hostile to the temple, the Essenes and the Jesus movement, focussed on the economic dimension of the temple system. The Essenes, for example, rebelled against what they saw as a corrupted temple, mainly because it compromised “for the sake of riches,” and piled up “money and wealth by plundering the people” (Damascus

Document). Jesus, as our reading has already suggested, had similar reasons for acting prophetically against the temple. The temple was the primary economic institution in Judea; it gathered its income from the people through taxation, tithes and offerings, and tribute. The regular festivals were times when devout Jews were encouraged to visit the temple and make contributions to it. The temple treasury held considerable resources, some of which were used to minister to the needs of the people, but the bulk of which were used to buy land and make loans. Through the rent charged on temple owned land and through the interest charged on loans and the foreclosure on bad debts, the temple amassed considerable wealth. This wealth was controlled by the temple elite, the Scribes, the Pharisees and the High Priest.

—“Doing Contextual Bible Study,” Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, 2007

It is worth noting, and indeed important to note, what John omits in his telling of this event, bearing in mind one is better served looking at the synoptic gospel for fact and timelines. While John sets this event at the beginning of his gospel, it is far more likely—indeed, virtually certain—that this happened as Mark and Matthew would have it, which is after the Triumphal Entry, at the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life.

Matthew 21:12–13

My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.

Mark 11:17b

Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.

These words of Jesus recall, and this is very important, the words of Jeremiah at a time of unrest and military and political danger. You will also hear an echo of the words spoken by Isaiah, predicting the return from Babylon when a new temple would need to be built.

Jeremiah 7:3–11

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

Coincidence?

Later, the prophet Isaiah prophesied Israel’s return from exile and a rebuilding of the temple that would be called a house of prayer for all nations. To those

who were returning from exile, Isaiah had these words of warning from the Lord: “Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.”

The ancient prophets were clear that the temple was to be a place where justice was both honoured and lived out. Caring for the widow, the orphan, the alien and the powerless was to be a given. The temple was to be a place of hope, joy, faith and prayer for “all people”...What is one to do when the house of prayer betrays its calling?

With these historical and literary insights added into the mix, in small groups discuss for 10 to 15 minutes:

- 3) With the information we now have, what new insights emerge about this violent and seemingly uncharacteristic moment in Jesus’ journey?
- 4) What connections do you see between the cleansing of the temple and the conclusions, with respect to the nature and direction of his mission and ministry, that Jesus arrived at in the wilderness and spoke of on the road to Caesarea Philippi?

Once again, record responses. This might be a time to push and prod a bit to draw out thoughts or suggestions that may not have been spoken.

Teaching Moment

It is worth pointing out that on the Sunday and Monday of the last week of Jesus’ life there were two symbolic actions against the domination systems at work and in place in Jerusalem: first, the Triumphal Entry (perhaps Anti-Triumphal Entry) and second, the Cleansing/Destruction of the Temple. Both are portrayed in Mark’s gospel as preplanned events, not spur-of-the-moment happenings. Scholars and theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, I believe rightly, describe these symbolic actions as “setting the already present Kingdom of God against

the already present Roman Imperial Power and the already present Jewish High-Priestly collaboration” (*The Last Week*, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Harper One, 2006). To put it another way, these two events proclaim to any with ears to hear, and perhaps a little background in the Old Testament, that “This is God’s world, not Caesar’s!”

Now it is time to connect a few dots and see what all of this might mean to us, right here and right now.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the renowned German theologian and pastor, saw his country under the power and control of the domination system of Hitler’s Nazis. The church, like other institutions, collaborated with or said nothing about the forces of evil and death as a means of survival. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Our Church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is not capable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world. Our words are bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: Prayer and righteous action” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*).

For Bonhoeffer, the church had lost its ability, and indeed its right to have a voice in its time and place. That would only be rectified when the church changed its focus from being all about self-preservation and committed itself to answer the call of Isaiah so many centuries ago and “maintain justice and do what is right.” Only then could the church—his church—be a house of prayer for all people and not a den of robbers.

In our time and place, the church has certainly

come under scrutiny and been subject to criticism from many, across generations, who see us as being primarily concerned with our own self-preservation. For many, we are not seen to be part of the solution but rather part of the problem. We are losing our ability to take the word of reconciliation and redemption to a world that desperately needs it. So... take 20 to 25 minutes to discuss the final questions in small groups.

- 5) How does Jesus’ violent, yet symbolic, action in the Temple speak to the mission and ministry of the church in this place and time?
- 6) How do we discern if we are building “a house of prayer for all people” in the fullest and best sense of Isaiah’s dream?
- 7) How, in these challenging times, do we keep “self-preservation” from becoming an end in itself?
- 8) What action does our reading of scripture today demand of us? What is required of us as individuals and as church if we are to proclaim that “this is God’s world not Caesar’s”?

Wrap-up

In plenary, take a few minutes for some general discussion about thoughts, challenges and opportunities or issues that arose from the conversations.

Affirm the participants for their work and commitment to the process—we don’t do nearly enough affirming in the church.

Conclude with prayer for one another, for the church and for those we are called to love and care for.

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