

Third Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

We continue in our reflections on the images of the private life and the images of the public life of Jesus. In this week's text – the explosive event where the moneylenders and vendors are driven from the temple – we see Jesus in public.

There are theological considerations about this week's gospel reading, and the reflection below will consider one of them. However, by way of preparation, it may be useful to think of a time when *you* were consumed with zeal; or perhaps *anger* may be the word for it.

What is your memory of that time? Where in your body did you feel the anger? What did you do with it? As you reflect on it, what are your feelings and analyses? Are you drawn first to the people who were near you, or justification, or regret, or something else?

And then consider the thing that sparked your anger. What was so important to you that you got angry, and showed that anger in public? Is that something you're happy with? Or something you're working to change? Would your reflection now be to get *less* angry in the future? Or is it to get *more* angry?

It is always worthwhile saying this, too: tell someone the story of your anger. It might be someone you know well, it might be someone outside of the circumstance, it might be a professional, it might be a neighbour. Telling the story can help living with the story, and – we hope – learning from the story, so that what is most important can be made manifest.

Text

John 2:13–22

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.

Comment

The gospel readings jump to John’s account for the next few weeks, and for this coming Sunday we hear John’s account of the clearing of the temple. This telling is interesting because — as you’ll see from the reference of John 2:13–22 — it is at the *start* of the ministry of Jesus that this account is narrated.

The clearing of the temple is one of the episodes of the life of Jesus that is narrated across all four gospels. There are many episodes that are narrated across the three synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — but the fourth gospel, John, often treads its own path. However, there are particular events that are found in all four and the clearing of the temple is one of them. The timing is different though. Matthew, Mark and Luke place the clearing of the temple in and around the events contributing to Jesus’ arrest, whereas John places it at the beginning of Jesus’ public life. John’s telling of Jesus’ public ministry takes place over three successive years, whereas the synoptic gospels can be read as narrating Jesus’ public life as if it were all over one year.

The Jesus of John is very clear about his identity, and this gospel account has the highest Christology among the four. The Jesus of John is often in great contrast to the Jesus of Mark, whose public life is defined by a certain secrecy. Nowhere in John, for instance, do we hear Jesus healing people but swearing them to secrecy, a feature that is consistent — although ineffective — in Mark.

So for this text, at this stage of Lent, we hear of Jesus being public — being disruptive — in the place of prayer. It is for this reason, often, that I think Jesus would not have been interested in being a conflict mediator. He didn’t spend his ministry trying to stop or mediate conflicts. While he was not conflict averse, he did seem especially comfortable in raising it when it seemed important.

Before considering this text, it might be worthwhile closing your eyes and trying to imagine the sound coming from this event: birds flapping, tables overturning, coins clanging, people shouting, people shouting back at the people shouting, someone crying, someone calling out for their parent, the sounds of feet rushing, the sound of people trying to clamber to see, the sounds of people trying to clamber to leave. And there’s the sound of that whip whistling through the air. Are there any particular sounds you’d wish to focus in on? They may be very loud, or very quiet. Why *that* sound for you today?

The section of the temple where it seems this market was taking place was the *court of the gentiles*. This was the place where gentiles, women, and anyone deemed temporarily—or permanently—unclean could come. Many of them could go no further, so this court would be the fullness of their experience of the temple. And this place was turned from a place of embrace into a place of economics.

To be unclean was often synonymous with being poor—a person might not have been able to afford the required money for purchasing a dove for a cleansing ritual for instance—so therefore, this court would have been a place where the faithful

who couldn't afford to participate in the rituals would have come. In many places, it was a gathering place for all, because all—at one point or another—would have recognised their ritual uncleanliness.

While there was another court for women (the wikipedia article on this is a helpful description), there were limits to how far a woman — however ritually pure and wealthy — could go. The court of the gentiles seems to have been the place where the *most* amount of people could pass through. Rather than being seen merely as the *first rung* in the steps towards the Mercy of God, what Jesus seems to be proposing throughout his work is that this court of the gentiles *is* the very place to meet God: in among the hubbub of mixed community, in among the places where you'll meet foreigners and locals, where the clean and unclean intermingle, where women are as present as men. There — in the theological and political and civic imagination of Jesus — is where you'll find God.

And it has been turned into a marketplace. This Court for the All has become a place to burden the burdened, to extort the already excluded. This is the house of God, the house of presence, the house of prayer.

Often, in positions of conflict, a narrative of faith might urge a quiet path, a reconciliatory path, a path of mediation, of not-making-a-fuss. While that might sometimes be true, it is not always true. In this important text, we see Jesus making a point. And he is not afraid to raise hell by the conflict he creates. Neither should we.

Response

Turning tables over for the sake of turning tables over is never the point. We know this. The point is to make the point.

Often, this can be done by finding campaigns that you believe in and finding out what can actually help. Is it promoting a particular person who is speaking for a cause? Is it amplifying their voice? Is it giving some money to a cause that's making a case for a change in policy? Is it supporting a court case where a small agency is suing a large corporation in the name of greater accountability?

Knowing what the right way to support an important cause isn't always easy. Sometimes, people can step in claiming to be the *Voice of the Voiceless* when in fact, the problem isn't that people are voiceless, it's that people aren't listening. Well meaning supporters charging in to crowd the chorus of voices isn't going to help. *What She Said* is a helpful thing to remember: i.e. looking for the voices already speaking out and doing what you can to point towards and amplify their voices.

For me, writers like Arundhati Roy, Binyavanga Wainaina, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Rebecca Solnit, Fintan O'Toole, and Roxane Gay are contemporary (or, in the case of Binyavanga Wainaina, recently deceased) artistic and social critics who often — in their essays and editorials — point beyond the outrage to the underlying facts that *should* have us turning over tables... but, again, not for the sake of turning over tables, but for making a point.

So for a response, some questions: Whose voice do you turn to to bring you deeper into analysis? Whose voice do you amplify because they have the authentic insight and experience to represent the cause they are raising awareness about? What questions do you ask yourself about when to make noise, when to raise a point, when to amplify others, how to dig deeper?

Prayer

Feeling-filled Jesus,

You believed that prayer was a courtyard
with open doors,
welcoming all.

And when the courtyard started charging
you started charging.

Charge us, Jesus of Nazareth,
to change; to change towards a citizenship of
inclusion, not of profit.

Empty the coffers of our toxic valuations of value.
Because you believed in the worth
of true community.
And were willing to die for it.

Amen.