

## Jesus Temple Tantrum

Quite often we forget that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. When we think of Jesus, we can think of his grace, his healing, his teaching. We can often overlook or forget his humanity, indeed his human-ness.

Nowhere in scripture do we hear of Jesus being injured, or feeling ill. He's almost always portrayed in a holy way. It would be easy to forgive someone new to the study of scripture, who thought that Jesus was never angry. And then you get today's gospel. Jesus loses his cool in a spectacularly public fashion.

Let me set the scene. Jesus and his followers have just come from Cana of Galilee where Jesus has performed his first miracle at the behest of his mother Mary. That miracle was turning water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana. And not only was it wine, it was "the good wine". The chief wine steward, when tasting what Jesus has just made declares "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." (John 2.10, NRSV)

After this event, Jesus, his siblings, mother, and disciples go to Capernaum for a few days to reflect on what has just happened. Jesus did, in changing the water into wine, show his disciples that he was no ordinary man...he was the Messiah, son of the living God.

Today's gospel begins with Jesus going to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Passover. The passover was an annual celebration which celebrated Israel's liberation from slavery. The temple in Jerusalem would be teeming with pilgrims from all over.

Jesus goes into the temple and the scene before him is disturbing. Instead of the faithful gathering for worship and sacrifice, they are greeted with vendors hawking their wares. He makes a whip of cords, he drives the money-changers out of the temple while bellowing "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!" (John 2.16, NRSV)

The gathering for the Passover was meant to be a time of celebration! The faithful, at one time, would have brought their own animals and birds for sacrifice, but the temple authorities understood that there was money to be made! So, instead of accepting sacrificial animals from the homes of the pilgrims, they demanded the sacrificial animals be from the temple itself.

And if that weren't enough, instead of accepting all forms of currency, the sacrificial temple animals could only be purchased with official temple currency. Profit on profit...or double-dipping, whatever you wish to call it. These were examples of the divergence between the poor and the wealthy. A poor pilgrim may only be able to purchase a dove instead of a sheep. So everyone in attendance would see that their sacrifice to God was not a large sacrifice.

Jesus appears to be outraged at the sales taking place instead of appropriate worship. His disciples are aware of this, when Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers and drives all of the animals out of the temple. "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" (John 2. 17, NRSV)

This phrase comes from Psalm 69, verse 9 "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." The psalm continues "when I humbled my soul with fasting, they insulted me for doing so. When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me." (Psalm 69. 10-12, NRSV).

You see, Jesus knows that he will be tormented before his death; he knows that the time is drawing closer to make himself known to the temple authorities. After all, he has been hunted, in one form or another, since his birth. Different Herod's, same outcome desired.

There were many false prophets in Jesus' time who claimed to be the Messiah. On most every street corner, preaching from pulpit or parapet, would be a man announcing himself as the Messiah. Jesus, by contrast, never refers to himself as the Messiah, and whenever anyone makes the connection, they are sworn to secrecy. Jesus knows that the time must be just right for him to be known in Jerusalem. Otherwise his disciples would not be ready to carry on after his death and resurrection.

So here is Jesus, outraged because of the injustice in the temple, the gaping difference in economic diversity and he simply can't take it anymore.

OR

was this Jesus who calculated and knowingly created a public scene, in order to draw attention to him, to “hide in plain sight” as it were, from those who sought to kill him.

The answer to both, is YES.

When Jesus makes his declaration, he is challenged by those present. “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.” (John 2.18-21, NRSV) and that is where the reading for today is supposed to end. Except there’s more that should be included.

Jesus and those present in the temple, “the Jews” as they are referred to, are challenging Jesus’ statement. They take Jesus’ description of “this temple” as the physical temple in which they are standing, when in fact, Jesus is referring to the temple as himself - as his physical body.

Now, please understand, when scripture speaks of “the Jews” they are not referring to the faith group we know as Judaism, rather, they speak of the inhabitants of Judea as “the Jews”. Speaking of Judea then, would be speaking of the Kootenays now. It’s a geographical area and its inhabitants, not a faith group. John’s gospel is not anti-semitic.

The chapter continues, “When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.” (John 2.23-25, NRSV)

In other words, Jesus knew that he had to be careful with whom he showed his true self - Messiah - son of the living God. He knew that his detractors would find any reason to arrest and try him. His charge was blasphemy, when in fact Jesus never, not once, referred to himself as Messiah or as King of the Jews.

Jesus needs the temple authorities to know that he has arrived in Jerusalem and is ready for them. At the same time, Jesus needs the temple authorities to know that the way they are treating the pilgrims is outrageous, especially those pilgrims who don’t have a lot of money.

There has been economic and social disparity since the dawn of time. The gap between rich and poor has never closed, in fact, one could argue that it has continuously widened. The gospel reading for today is very powerful on many levels: it shows Jesus as a social justice warrior - a defender of the poor.

It also shows him as politically savvy. He knows that he is wanted. He knows he needs to present himself in order for the events of holy week to unfold as they are meant to. But he also wants to retain just enough control that his discovery is made when he is ready -- when the time is right.

The Passover was a major feast and celebration in those days. The faithful would come from miles around to gather and celebrate at the Temple, what we may know as the Mother Church. What better time for the governor, Pontius Pilate, to know that Jesus was there? How better to let Herod Antipas know that he was ready for battle?

Baby Jesus was wanted by Herod the Great. Jesus, rightful King of the Jews, was also wanted by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.

And just as Jesus knew that his time on earth was drawing to a close, he needed to retain some control over how the message was received. The message that he was going to die, yet would rise again. When he spoke of the temple, and rising three days later, his followers, on reflection, would understand. However, at the time, those present thought there was no way the physical temple in which they stood could be torn down then reconstructed in three days...especially when it had been under construction for forty-six YEARS!

And so today's gospel is multi-layered and multi-faceted. It is about Jesus as defender of the poor and as a political militant. It is about saint and sinner, criminal and defender. It is about visionary and missionary. It is about Jesus the Christ. Son of God; fully divine, yet also fully human.

Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan  
Lent 3  
John 2.13-22