



Cleansing
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Year B, Lent 3

1 Cor. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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We could take the story in today's Gospel, often referred to as the cleansing of the temple. We could question Jesus' anger as many have done. We could look at the story as part of the sequence of events which leads up to Jesus' crucifixion, the increasing hostility of the Jewish authorities towards him as he continues to challenge their focus on outward practice over inward focus and attention.

But I'm going to invite you to see the temple and its marketplace and Jesus' actions there as a metaphor for us and the call on us to align our lives with the Gospel.

By clearing the temple of its traders and money changers, Jesus is pointing the Jewish authorities back to the true purpose of the temple - worship of God. That is our true purpose too - to worship God by aligning our hearts and our lives with the Gospel.

Which leads to the question: what is it that we need to drive out, what is it that needs to change? What/who is diverting our focus from living the Gospel in the way the marketplace practices at temple diverted attention from the worship of God? And the accompanying question: what is causing our misalignment?

Probably we are a bit like Jewish authorities. We believe we are doing things the right way. We have no intention of living contrary to the Gospel. We would never knowingly cause hurt etc. The Jewish authorities allowed the temple to be taken over by money changers and trading for what likely appeared good reason to them. Practicalities took over - people coming to make sacrifices at Passover had to pay temple taxes and they had to do that in temple coinage so the money changers were needed. Animals offered as sacrifices had to be unblemished so

being able to buy animals at the Temple rather than bringing them from afar with all the knocks and bruises of the journey was necessary. All this was in service of the temple. But it was also diverting from the main purpose of the temple - the worship of God and because it was carried out right in the Temple precinct it was defiling the temple.

This gospel reading also casts light on the way appearances can be deceiving. The temple appeared to be devoted to worshipping God but its actual practices were askew. Lots of show but not enough heart for the important things. We can be like this. We can be all for show, all cowboy hat but no cattle. We can be taken over, diverted gradually, pulled away.

On the IT programme I've been working on over the last year, people sometimes talk about our True North, the core thing we're building, the thing our attention should be focussed on. So we don't get distracted, taken over by the nice to haves, the fluff or by complexity. If we keep our eyes on our True North, it's easier to see what's important and keep things on track.

Living the Gospel way is like that, keeping our eyes on True North, bringing ourselves back, time and again to the Gospel.

In throwing out the traders from the temple, Jesus was focusing on True North, the "core" of the temple's purpose. He saw the animals and the traders as distractions.

He challenged the Jewish authorities. He called them to attention, shone a light on what they were doing and asked them to realign with True North. He pointed out that the temple - so important for the Jews - is not what it was meant to be. It was not fulfilling its purpose. His clarity in this is dazzling.

The call is for us to have the same focus and clarity. To discern and live in alignment with what is at the heart of the Gospel, what and who does it call us to be, what does it mean for us as individuals and for our world that we are committed to living Gospel lives?

For us as individuals, our ideas about ourselves, our conceits, the way we present ourselves in the world are not important. What's important is how aligned we are internally to the Gospel, how deeply it penetrates it and how that flows from us in our lives.

This Gospel reading issues us with the same challenge Jesus issued to the Jewish authorities. To be clear about how our lives align with the Gospel,

To follow the Gospel we must constantly challenge ourselves, re-examine our lives and the directions we are taking, be fierce with ourselves in the way Jesus was fierce at the temple, and realign.

This re-examination is not about castigating ourselves for our shortcomings, driving ourselves into the ground for our failings. It's about being aware, sometimes nudging, sometimes pushing ourselves forward, growing, working towards the fulfilment of our purpose.¹

If the change we call for in ourselves drives deep, we will feel our centres of gravity shift, in the way the Jewish authorities must have felt their centres of gravity shift when Jesus challenged them for making the temple a market place. And I think it's inevitable that as our own personal centres of gravity shift, we will be driven to bring about change in the world. Jesus' anger may not have been just about the practices that have developed at the temple but about the whole sacrificial system, the idea that God has to be appeased with a blood sacrifice. So we can hear this Gospel as calling not just for change in us as individuals but for changes in our communities, our world.

And Jesus' rage? How does that fit in? In driving out the animals and the money-changers Jesus was pointing out, in a very potent way, that things needed to change. The temple and the Jewish authorities were on the wrong road, and Jesus was pointing them back in the right direction.

If we think of the title often given to this reading - "the cleansing of the temple", the change Jesus sought was cleansing in the sense of putting things back on course. Sometimes to achieve realignment aka cleansing rage is needed. The rage is necessary, a catalyst, it allows something new to grow by sweeping aside what stands in the way of change.

Lent is often marked by giving up something, an echoing of Jesus' sacrifice by sacrificing something in our lives. Maybe we could think of the giving up in terms of cleansing, putting things back on course. Change, realignment, a pushing aside of the things that divert us from living fully in alignment with the Gospel, a willingness to shift, to be moved. The giving up might be characterised by trading pride for humility and a willingness

¹ Brian McLaren The Great Spiritual Migration : How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian. Page 32

to change, to live more fully, more purposefully and in greater alignment with our True North?

In John's Gospel, Jesus' cleansing of the temple sets the stage for everything that follows. It doesn't come at the end of Jesus's ministry as the final straw that leads to his arrest, crucifixion and death as it does in the other three Gospels. In John's telling of cleansing the temple, Jesus is pointing forward to a new way of relating to God. He's suggesting the animal sacrifices might not be necessary, that maybe God is a God of extravagant love and generous grace, as well as pointing forward to the sacrifice he himself will make.. And so for us, making sure we've got our focus right will set the stage for everything in our lives.

And the great thing is that our willingness to check our focus and alignment, a willingness to change, holds within it hope. Hope that as individuals we will live fully, that we will grow into ourselves, know more and more of the expansiveness of God's love and compassion, and experience the excitement and inspiration that knowledge bring and hope that the world will know the reality of this too.

Cate spoke last week about Jesus' way opening up for the full life of the Creator to flow. Resisting and naming behaviours and systems that block, divert and prevent such flow and allow injustice to flourish. This is what we see Jesus modelling in this reading. The traders at the temple were preventing the full life of God from flowing and so he sweeps them aside. His actions open the possibility that the temple might be restored to its true focus - the worship of God.

As we seek to realign and seek to maintain our focus on living the Gospel, we must do this work with compassion for ourselves and others, knowing that as we do it we are held in God's love, wrapped in compassion, that we hold within us that hope of goodness, rightness, beauty, and aliveness that Jesus manifested at the temple, knowing that we are the embodiment of our God who is loving, healing, reconciling.