



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE THIRD SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church IN LENT
in Destin, Florida March 3, 2024

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

Imagine Jesus and a few of his followers stretched across highway 98 stopping traffic on a Sunday morning to protest corruption in local churches. Or local government. Or local schools. Or any local institution. Hypothetically, of course. Jo would call this my sanctified imagination. I have no reason to believe that any other local church, school, or government agency or official is corrupt. But Jesus leading a local protest akin to occupy Wall Street just does not fit the vision of Jesus we like to see: the sweet Jesus, the compassionate, merciful, ever humble and almost docile Jesus, the familiar good shepherd, carrying the straying lamb back to the flock.

Not the Jesus we see in the temple in this morning's reading from the Gospel according to John. The Jesus we see this morning is whip-in-hand, driving sheep and cattle off the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple. This is the Jesus who turned over tables and scattered the coins of the moneychangers. And if any of us had been standing there with his disciples, we likely would have said, "Holy" Well, you fill in the blanks. If it is one of those few words we cannot say on television, then we probably should not actually say it in a sermon.

But should we really be surprised to see Jesus angry? In last week's reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus rebuked Peter harshly, "Get behind me, Satan." He also called a whole generation, "adulterous and sinful." Throughout Jesus' ministry he called out the Jewish religious leaders as hypocrites with some very harsh language.

But Jesus never resorted to physical violence against another human being, even as angry as he was in the Temple. Let's face it, Jesus was...hmmm ... but there is another word we didn't used to be able to say on broadcast television. How times have changed.

So why did Jesus get angry? What was the significance of his anger? And what lessons do we take from Jesus' anger? How many of us react with anger towards those around us when we are hurt or fearful?

Jesus had to be hurt. The Temple, the sole seat of worship for the Jews, was being desecrated. The leadership was collaborating with the Roman occupiers of Judea to maintain their status, wealth, and power at the expense of the general population.

And here we need a little context to understand what was going on in the Court of the Gentiles, which was where animals were sold for sacrifice and money was exchanged. The only coinage acceptable to pay the Temple tax or purchase sacrificial animals was the Galilean shekel or Temple shekel, both Jewish coins. At Passover as many as two and a quarter million Jews would descend on Jerusalem. Even today, at least one Passover in Jerusalem remains on every Jew's bucket list. They travelled with coinage of all sorts, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Palestinian, and so on, that had to be exchanged for the shekel if they were to pay their tax and purchase animals.

Nothing in the coin exchange would have angered Jesus. But the money changers were extracting enormous fees for the exchange – as much as a typical day's wage at the time. The Passover pilgrims to the Temple, who hardly could afford it, were being fleeced by the exorbitant fees. And it was not only the social injustice that enraged Jesus. What's worse it was done in connection with and even in the name of religion. And it was personal. This was God's house, his Father's house. Instead of a place of reverence and worship, it had become a place where people were cheated and exploited by a hypocritical cabal of Jewish religious leaders.

Jesus also was angry because animal sacrifice had become a substitute for authentic worship. Jesus was well aware of the numerous admonitions from the prophets that burnt offerings and animal sacrifices were essentially irrelevant. No such sacrifice could restore one's proper relationship with God. This was Jesus' point in driving the animals out of the Temple.

Jesus also was offended that all this activity and commotion was taking place in the Court of the Gentiles. It was the lowest court, below the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites, and the Court of the Priests. It was the only place Gentiles could worship. Except worship was impossible in the melee of animals, birds, and money changing. The Gentiles – deliberately or not – were being shut out from the presence of God, excluded from the only place of worship they knew. And, yes, some Gentiles who were not ethnically Jewish and had not converted to Judaism formally still chose to worship at the Temple, although only at a level below the Jewish women.

In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus is quoted as saying as he drove out the animals and moneychangers, "My house shall be called the house of

prayer for all nations.” No wonder he was affronted to the point of anger ... and action.

How would Jesus react if he walked into St. Andrew’s this morning? What might offend or disturb him? Is our worship authentic? Or are we just going through the motions? And saying words so familiar that they have lost their meaning?

Do we come to worship unprepared or ill-prepared? Are we truly conscious that we are inviting Christ’s presence in a very particular and profound way? Or are we here just to see friends and dawdle over a cup of coffee after service?

Are we more concerned with how we worship than why we worship? Are we more concerned about our stain glass windows or shiny vessels? Or are we asking how our surroundings and accoutrements serve to connect us with God?

And what are we doing that might tend to exclude people? Or, perhaps, more to the point, what are we doing to include people? Not just the Episcopalians that move to the area, but the lost, the lonely, the needy, the excluded from other churches.

Are we remembering that Jesus is here among us? Now. This moment. Jesus in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist? Jesus residing in our hearts? Jesus asking the tough questions? Jesus whose anger was as real as anger can be, but also was a tactic to draw attention to how worship in the Temple had gone wrong?

Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple, and it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. But Jesus never intended to actually rebuild the Temple. He was speaking metaphorically. What he would rebuild was a new way to worship. A new way to be church.

Are we prepared for Jesus to visit? Not only our church? But also the depths of our hearts?

Lent is a time when are given a special opportunity to do a “walk-through” of our church and our hearts. To discover and root out the derelictions and misdirections of our lives. To repent our missteps and misdeeds. And to reorient and reset our lives accordingly. To be torn down and rebuilt in a new way.

Otherwise, we risk a visit from this Jesus who would resort to anything, even death on a cross, to show us the error of our ways.