

Entering the Passion of Jesus – Chapter 2

The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger

The story we know as the “Cleansing of the Temple” occurs in all four Gospels but the details in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are quite different from what we read in the Gospel of John. This chapter looks closely at what Mark and John tell us about this well-known but perhaps little understood incident and introduces some of the distinct perspectives present in the Matthew and Luke.

In terms of the actual setting, we know that the Temple complex was enormous, the size of twelve soccer fields placed end to end. If Jesus turns over a table or two in one part of the complex, it is not going to make much difference to the rest of the complex. The action did not stop all business of the day. It is more symbolic than practical in terms of its significance.

Driving Out the Vendors: In each of the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of John, the actions of Jesus appear to be violent. “We might think of his action in terms of righteous or even holy anger. There are times, we may find, that business as usual is not only inappropriate, it is obscene. Something has to be done ... if we do not feel some sort of rage when preventable tragedies occur, then something has gone terribly wrong with us.” What is the basis for Jesus’ actions? Why is he so upset? If he “is not condemning the Temple itself, or financial exploitation, or purity practices, what is he condemning?”

House of Prayer for All Nations: According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke the concern is not the Temple, but the attitude of the people who are coming to it. In Mark, Jesus begins by saying that the Temple is to be a house of prayer for all the nations, condensing and then quoting Isaiah 56:6-7. This point even more acute because Jesus is actually standing in the Court of the Gentiles when he makes this affirmation. The Temple is a place of welcome for all people. Matthew and Luke drop out “for all nations” because they know the Temple was already a house of prayer for all nations. They change the focus to one of prayer. “And prayer gets us closer to what is going on in the Synoptic tradition.”

Den of Thieves: Jesus asserts that the Temple has become a den of thieves citing Jeremiah 7:11. This is not so much a place where thieves actually commit robbery as it is a place where they go when they have taken what does not belong to them. The present day comparison to what Jesus and Jeremiah condemn is easy to make. Churches “should be places where people promise to live a godly life, and then keep their promises.”

Stop Making My Father's House a Marketplace: In John's Gospel Jesus starts not simply by overturning tables, but also using a "whip of cords" and driving out the vendors. He tells them to stop making the Temple a "marketplace" alluding to Zechariah 14:21. Here Jesus "anticipates the time when there will no longer be a need for vendors in the Temple because everyone will have enough and be able to worship in love and peace. A time when there will be no separation between home and a place of worship. "Can we envision this? Can we work toward it?"

Zeal for Your House: In John's account the disciples provide an interpretation of the scene. They remember Psalm 69:9, "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me." This leads us to ask, what consumes us? For what do we display zeal? "Jesus talked about finding the 'pearl of great price': what is ours?"

But He Was Speaking of the Temple of His Body: In John the Temple scene ends with Jesus saying "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." As John tells us, "he was speaking of the temple of his body." Here are three things to think about: 1) John tells us that Jesus' body is the New Temple, a reconciliation for many, how do we respond to such generosity? 2) To take seriously the idea that the community gathered in Jesus' name is his body requires that this be a place of welcome for all. Is it? 3) The body is also the temple of the Holy Spirit. The human body is of inherent value. Do we care for the people around us? "Lent is a time to think more seriously about how and what and with whom we eat. And that topic brings us later to the two suppers that are part of the Lenten story."