

Sermon for 3rd March 2024, Year B, Lent 3

Preached at St John's, Baillieston

John 2:13-22

Sermon

Over the past couple of weeks, our Monday afternoon Lent group has been exploring a bible-reading practice called 'Lectio Divina' which is Latin for 'Divine Reading'. This practice suggests slowly and prayerfully reading a bible passage, perhaps multiple times, while meditating on words or phrases that leap out at us, and which, with a bit of careful listening to God, might have something to say to us in our own lives and situations.

This approach might also include imagining bible scenes in our heads and wondering which if any of the characters we most identify with in any of these compelling situations that Jesus leads us into.

Our gospel reading today gives us a very rich scene for this sort of imaginative pondering, as Jesus strides into the temple precinct with a whip of cords, and starts causing absolute havoc in a very un-Jesus-like fashion.

I wonder, if we were present in this scene, where would we be standing? Are we at the tables buying our sacrifice for the temple? Are we changing our Roman coins for proper temple coinage that lacks the offensive image of the emperor? Are we one of the Jewish temple leaders trying to show everyone what to do and where to go? Are we a visiting non-Jew, for whom this marketplace would be the closest we would ever get to the temple of God? Or are we one of Jesus's disciples, still full of enthusiasm for the revolution we think Jesus will bring?

From your particular vantage point, how do you react when Jesus starts chasing out the traders and overturning the tables of the moneychangers? Are you

thrilled that someone is finally fixing all the corruption in the religious hierarchy and giving the exploitative wealthy people what for? Are you feeling the religious or political adrenaline that someone is actually ‘doing something’ radical and not just endlessly talking about it? Are you cheering Jesus for striking out at the heart of a religious establishment that has kept its rich outer trappings but completely forgotten its true inner spiritual purpose?

Or are you outraged that some random upstart from Galilee is violently disrupting your fair and reasonable religious business practices? After all, people can’t be expected to bring animals for sacrifice hundreds of miles by foot! And we can’t be having the image of the Roman oppressor on coins used to buy the animals, so what else do you expect us to do, Jesus? This marketplace is a practical and religious necessity! God made the system, not us.

Or are you a kind-hearted temple servant just trying to help everyone fulfil their spiritual pilgrimage and make their sacrifice, now confronted with this unruly and uncivilised protest that is as disruptive and frustrating as an anti-oil activist throwing orange confetti at a sporting event. “Oh Jesus, while I may agree with your sentiment, this is hardly the best way to go about making your point, is it?”

I think most of us have probably taken different roles in our lives when it comes to what we might think of as ‘direct action’. When we’re younger, we’re probably more likely to join protests, maybe even get involved in active disruption to make our point. Remember that Jesus here is still only 30 years’ old. When I was that age, I was visiting eco-warrior communities living in woodlands and joining protests in farmers’ fields against genetically modified crops. As we get older, and maybe more reconciled to the way things are, we perhaps just want to get on with things. No point making a fuss – takes way too much energy! And many radicals eventually end up in positions of responsibility for various civic and religious organisations, sustaining the status quo embodied

in many years of good tradition. Sorry, Jesus, you've made your point, but please sit down, the Diocese have said 'no'.

My sense is that wherever we stand to watch this scene play out, Jesus's actions are a real challenge to us. Some of us may be horrified that the Prince of Peace is resorting to raw violence to make a point. After all, he refuses to use violence anywhere else in the gospels. He won't let the disciples call down fire from heaven to consume a village that rejects him. He won't let himself be made King of the Jews to start a rebellion against Rome. He won't let his disciples protect him from being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. And of course, he won't call down angels to save himself from being executed on the Cross. But here he personally wields a whip and physically attacks the people he believes are corrupting the temple – his father's house, his family seat, so to speak.

Some of us might well be cheering Jesus on and wishing he'd been a bit less meek and mild in the rest of his ministry. For them, this scene is the perfect justification for their own anger towards whatever group they think is ruining the church and leading it to irrelevance, heresy, and oblivion. Look! Even Jesus was harsh when it was necessary to save proper religion! And what church leader hasn't occasionally been relieved that even Jesus occasionally lost his temper? It can be an excuse for all kinds of bad behaviour, just as his call to turn the other cheek can become a way to silence activists and complainers.

My point is that throughout the Christian faith, we have inherited this tension between the prophetic voice of the protestor, calling out institutional corruption, self-interest, and comfortable exclusive cliques, and the stable voice of the establishment, sustaining tradition for future generations as best they can.

A Church without prophetic voices quickly devolves into becoming an overly comfortable copy of the prevailing culture, while a prophetic activism that doesn't know how to build enduring institutions is quickly pushed to the margins

and forgotten, collapses in endless schism, or is taken over and co-opted by the very powers it was railing against.

For a healthy, sustainable church, we need both Jesuses – the one with the whip, and the one who said to love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and do good to those who persecute you. Without the one, we become complacent and self-satisfied, without the other, we become hard and self-righteous.

Yes, Jesus loves and forgives and comforts us, but sometimes he also wants to stir us into action. I wonder – which Jesus do you need to meet today?