

12th February 2023 (John 2:13-25) – Life Stories #6 The Pilgrims’ Story: ‘Do whatever he tells you’

Many years ago, I used to visit prisoners weekly in the local jail. The chapel where we met had an extraordinary picture, which I’ve never seen in quite the same way anywhere else. It showed Jesus stood on top of one of the moneylenders’ tables in the temple courts, muscles taut, whip in hand, while people cowered around him. It was a very masculine image, far more imposing than the way Jesus is usually presented – and it struck me how important it was for the men in that place to see a Messiah they could respect.

The story of Jesus confronting the market stall holders and money-changers in the temple has often troubled people. Brought up on the idea of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’, many struggle with this more confrontational Jesus. But perhaps the problem is more with our enthusiasm to emphasise *one* aspect of Jesus’ character, and not his courage or his absolute determination to see the will of God done. After all, if Jesus really was as ‘mild’ as we sometimes make him out to be, why did he have so many enemies?

There is always the temptation in our spiritual lives – and especially when it comes to beholding Jesus – to only see what we want to see. To embrace the bits we like, and ignore or shy away from the bits we don’t. But **Jesus is always bigger than our view of him** – so maybe it’s no bad thing to tackle this more unsettling passage today.

So, let’s first delve into why Jesus was so outraged by what was going on in the temple. After all, temple sacrifices were commanded by the Law of the Lord, so why is Jesus objecting to people offering the very things which are required as sacrifices? The answer is not that these things were there, but rather **the way the system was operating. It was corrupt or corroded on at least three levels.** First, these sacrifices were being used as a way of making money. People’s spiritual needs were being commoditised. This is what Jesus primarily objected to in the story as John tells it: ‘Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’ he says in v16.

However it goes beyond mere entrepreneurial initiative. Arguably, the system didn’t need to be turned into a commercial enterprise at all; but what was worse was that people’s needs weren’t just being commoditised, they were being exploited. The temple had its own treasury, and you could only use *their* coins to buy sacrifices. Of course, you could only exchange the coins at favourable rates to those organising this racket – and it was well known that the religious powers-that-be who ran the temple did very well out of this practice.

It meant that **devout pilgrims who had come to worship the Lord were being ripped off** – not only did they have the time and expense of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem – when they got there, they had to pay over the odds for the spiritual activities they did there.

But there was yet a third way that what was going on in the temple was wrong – it’s one not mentioned by John, but is mentioned by Mark, who reminds us that the temple was designed to be a house of prayer for all nations. The moneylenders and market stalls were set up in the Court of the Gentiles, which is the one place in the temple where non-Jews – i.e. the rest of the world – could pray to the Lord. So non-Jewish pilgrims were unable to worship God as they had planned, because the market stalls were flogging sacrifices for the Jewish pilgrims only.

So for all of these reasons, enough was enough. **Zeal for the glory of God consumed Jesus, as the text says (v17), and therefore he acted decisively.** As a significant aside, this was probably the act which was most influential in getting him killed, as, in doing this, Jesus went beyond being a spiritual reformer to being a direct threat to civil power.

Let's just pause here for a moment to review our own practices today. We might listen to all this, and shake our heads sadly and sagely; we might even think to ourselves: 'this would never happen nowadays' – but can we really be so sure about that? Money is a powerful thing, and it's easy for any of us as individuals, or indeed, any Christian churches or organisations to find themselves getting sucked into the sorts of things Jesus is challenging here.

The current crisis is hitting churches, too: many are under much greater financial pressure than they were previously – so it's tempting to think about ways we can generate more income. But, **Jesus' response here reminds us that the ends don't justify the means;** if we start obsessing over money above everything else, we fall into exactly those traps that the temple authorities did.

The way of Christ is different – it relies on God's provision. Which is not to say that we don't offer ways for people to give generously and contribute in other ways. But we don't pressure people, or make them pay their way for everything, or extract every bit of revenue we can. We remain a generous house of prayer for all nations, and trust our gracious Lord for the rest.

And we do so, holding onto one other great truth we see in this passage. After Jesus had this amazing encounter in the temple, and saw the miracles he did, it led many (so the text says) to 'believe in his name' (v23). But then John says this strange thing: 'Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people' (v24). In fact he says it again the very next verses: 'Jesus knew what was in each person.'

This is both a bit unsettling, but also a great encouragement. **Jesus knows our hearts.** There are times when what is in our hearts is not good, and we need to bring that before him. Maybe there is something today that we need help to change, which might be our attitude to money – take it to Jesus now... But it is also an encouragement, because the big difference for us is that Jesus has chosen to dwell here, with us, in our hearts. We are now, each of us, God's temple, because Jesus dwells with us – how amazing is that? The cross, which Jesus refers to implicitly in this passage, has made us clean, and Jesus' knowledge of us is bathed in love and grace. He knows us – and *still* loves us! He is *for* us, and wants us to become all that we can be.

So Jesus knows our hearts – and therefore **if our hearts are right with Jesus, then we can rest assured, not just of his love, but of his provision.** We don't have to resort to financial sharp practice to see out these difficult times, or indeed any times. Jesus is not a big fan of those who rip other people off. Instead, if we keep our hearts right with Jesus and take our needs to him, he will provide. He is the one who can raise the temple; he is the one who can meet our needs. He has all the resources of heaven and earth at his disposal.

May zeal for his house and his name consume us like it did Jesus – and, in these difficult times, may we discover that Jesus has at his disposal all the resources that we need. Amen.