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Introduction

Today's Gospel passage deals with, if not the most provocative, then certainly the most violent and explosive of the actions of Jesus. The importance of the story is testified to by its appearance in all 4 Gospels and while some details differ between the accounts, each conveys a clear sense of strong emotion coupled with direct and vigorous action on the part of Jesus. As is so often the case in the stories of John's Gospel the reaction and insight of those who witness the episode varies: for the disciples it becomes – at least in retrospect – an occasion which expands their understanding of Jesus' true identity; for others the incident and subsequent exchanges merely increase their sense of bafflement and hostility.

Preparation

Either:

Find some pictures of Jesus clearing the Temple and spend some time examining them. Make a list of all the emotions depicted and think about their possible roots and likely consequences. Have you ever been moved to do something just through the sheer power of emotion?

Or:

Think about an incident in your own experience which you found totally baffling at the time and only came to appreciate or understand with hindsight. What were the things which triggered that understanding? Was there anything you missed at the time which could have helped your understanding 'in the moment'?

Text

John 2:13–22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Comment

As already noted, this story is common to all four Gospels; but whereas the Synoptics place it at the end of Jesus' ministry making it the precipitating event for his subsequent arrest, John places it right at the start of his ministry (with the raising of Lazarus as the corresponding provocative incident.) However John is not primarily interested in presenting us with a chronological account of the life of Jesus; rather he wants to show, through a sequence of signs and incidents, both the true identity of Jesus as Messiah and also how this comes to be recognised (or fails to be recognised) by those who encounter him. This incident thus becomes the second element of a two-stage process by which Jesus declares himself privately and publicly.

The first phase of this occurs almost immediately prior in John's narrative with Jesus' first miracle (Jn 2:1-11). Here those to whom Jesus 'reveal(s) his glory' (another very Johannine motif) are his disciples, family, and friends and the setting is the semi-rural stage of Cana. John tells us that as a result his disciples, at least, 'believed in him' – though he doesn't make explicit what this means. Today's passage is the second stage – but here the setting is very much more public, urban, and religiously and politically charged.

However whilst Jesus' anger is clear from all the accounts, the reasons behind the emotion are possibly more enigmatic. A common assumption, underlined by the standard title of 'the cleansing of the temple', is that this episode was primarily a religious gesture. But whilst the money changers (the Temple Tax of half a shekel had to be paid in specific coinage) did indeed make a profit on the transactions, this was allowed for in the Talmud and thus not itself an illegal practice. It is possible that extortionate rates were being levied but the text does not particularly indicate this. Indeed Jesus' comments seem to show him more concerned with the fact that animals for sacrifice are being sold within the Temple itself. Again though, there are different possible things at work here: the introduction (by Caiaphas) of traders into the Temple – specifically the Court of the Gentiles – happened around 30CE (they had previously been located off site) and some scholars suggest that Jesus' anger might be rooted in some of the complex religious implications of this for the sacrificial system. Another possibility is that it might have been aroused because the presence of the traders made prayer impossible in the Court of the Gentiles, thus excluding those who could not go beyond it from approaching God.

However the the Temple at the time of Jesus was a complex institution in which religious aspects were also entwined with ones relating to secular political power. Under Roman rule, the priests had lost autonomy, even over strictly religious matters, the Chief Priest had become an appointee (and thus potentially a tool) of the incumbent Roman prefect, and Roman economy benefited from trade associated with the Temple. So it is also possible that Jesus' anger might have been directed against a political complicity which gave rise to oppressive practices. The accusation in the Synoptics that the Temple has become 'a den of robbers' might provide some support for this reading. The reference is to Jeremiah 7:11, part of a passage in which the prophet is calling for the people to amend their ways – to stop the oppression of others and the shedding of blood (and the Hebrew word used for robber – *ḥāzēq* – has implications of violence, not just stealing goods). Moreover since a den is somewhere the robbers would go to hide, rather than the place where they would go to steal, it may very well be that Jesus is not accusing the traders of robbery but calling out those who hide oppressive actions behind positions of authority in the Temple.

But whilst we may not be able to definitively locate the cause of Jesus' anger or identify the locus against which his challenge is directed, the purpose and consequences are clear: Jesus undertakes a deliberate action which effectively brings him out of obscurity and makes him very visible to the religious and secular authorities. Although the confrontation with the latter will not happen until much

later, the first of many with the former group follows immediately. However, as is to be so often the case in John's narrative, this is a conversation in which the partners talk past each other. Jesus' questioners recognise that his actions are making a statement – he has implicitly claimed to be God's Messiah – but they want him to furnish some 'proof' to back up the claim. The subsequent conversation about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple leads nowhere because their assumptions close it down and thus their chance to see a little more clearly is lost.

Jesus' actions and comments also make him visible in a different light to his disciples. This is a far less benign situation than the wedding at Cana – and its revelatory edge is therefore somewhat sharper: just as in last week's reading, the disciples are shown a different perspective on what following Jesus is likely to entail. The passage also allows us another glimpse into the fact that seeing and understanding are sometimes gradual processes. It's not entirely clear whether the 'remembering' of v 17 is contemporaneous with Jesus' actions in the Temple or whether it follows on at a different time. However there is no such ambiguity about v22 – this is remembering and reflection at a later date in the light of subsequent events. No doubt at the time the disciples were just as mystified as those others who heard Jesus' claim about rebuilding the Temple but somehow – possibly because they have already begun to get a glimmer of sight – they continue to keep the door to learning open even when they do not fully grasp the implications of what Jesus says or does. With subsequent recollection and reflection, the different pieces begin to cohere and the true identity of Jesus, and the significance of that for their lives, becomes visible.

If we take this story as a lens through which to look at conflict and our responses to it, there are various things which reinforce and expand the points we were considering in our Lent 2 reflection.

Firstly, we need to be actively aware of how our own responses might open up or close down possibilities for understanding and progress. Last week we saw how the expectations which the disciples had about how the Messiah would behave impeded – at least to begin with – their ability to receive and respond to a different vision for this. In today's reading, it is Jesus' religious interlocutors who struggle – but this time the barriers seem to be emotional as well as conceptual. Jesus' actions, themselves with a powerful emotional component, seem to have generated reciprocal strong emotions in those who want to question him. Whether this is fear or anger or another emotion, the result is a scornful dismissive tone – one can feel the sarcastic edge in v20 – and it is this which seems to keep them trapped in a certain place of the conversation.

Secondly, to gain the kind of insight which allows us to see what may not be immediately clear or understandable, requires time and attention. Once again the disciples show us that retention, recollection and reflection are all important elements in the journey towards understanding – particularly of that which is outside our current frames of reference or experience.

Finally there is something which we have not touched on before but which this story also encourages us to ponder: sometimes in order to effect change – whether through challenging a wrong, exposing an injustice, or mending something broken – we made need to make ourselves more visible, even when that may seem a risky thing to do.

Response

Look up some of the other conversations which Jesus has with individuals and

groups in John's Gospel and trace the path towards understanding or lack of understanding in them, seeing if you can identify the different factors – whether emotions, attitudes or ideas, involved in this. Is there any one encounter which particularly resonates with you? If so go back and spend a little more time with it, using it as a lens to reflect on your own journey.

Prayer

Jesus,
You came
to make God visible.
Open our eyes
to what we do not yet see;
Open our minds
to what we do not yet understand;
Open our lives
to what we do not yet love;
that we too
may make God visible
in the world.

Amen