

James Elward
Sunday 6th March 2021

Introduction

Certainly, when you think about Jesus at least for me growing up was either in a manger or on the cross, or even out with his disciples with lots of people crowded around. My first thought doesn't tend to be Him running about the temple whipping and overturning tables. A far cry from the meek and mild we saw a few months ago.

Signs / Context

When we look at the context of the passage here, we discover that in the bigger narrative John is giving his readers a the second sign of Jesus authority as the Son of God. The first is mere verses prior in the wedding of cana. The third will be his encounter with a severely disabled man in chapter 5.

Crowds swell the population of Jerusalem at Passover, bringing an increased need for services, not least of all access to the temple's sacrificial rites.

Imagine this--

Crowds in general heighten the potential for disturbance and therefore the increased presence of Roman troops for crowd control. In this volatile setting, Jesus makes a whip, drives out animals, people selling them, and moneychangers; he pours out their money and tips over their tables. The second sign pertains to the temple, but what invokes Jesus' wrath?

Why?

ST Augustine talks about how buying and selling in the temple wasn't actually a sin, if the purpose was for offerings in the temple.

Therefore is it not unlawful to sell what is honorable or even needed to atone for sins? But still Jesus makes a whip and drives them out. Why?

It wasn't as if it was a moment of anger, **interestingly he took his time (makes a whip)**

This indicates to me at least that this act was premeditated.

I mean there were many things that Jesus would have seen that would have made very angry, but, at least this is the only recorded moment where we see him make a whip. (Anger is not a sin).

This to me looks like John is framing the event as a **prophetic parabolic act**.

In other words, he believes that JUST like the Old Testament prophets who acted out their prophetic pronouncements, Jesus is speaking prophetically through his temple action (Like Ezekiel who lay on his side for 430 days- admittedly left side for 390 and right for 40 in case anyone was wondering or even the story of Hosea).

In this light, I would argue the question from “the Jews” in verse 18 might make more sense: So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”

Based on this response in John, I would argue that the Jews didn’t interpret what Jesus was doing as an act of either defilement or violence inside the temple.

The proof in my eyes is this:

If they thought a crazy man was acting violent, whipping people, and throwing tables around in a mad rage, why did they not arrest him.

The romans who were always stationed at the nearby Antonia fortress (which was located very close to the temple and would likely of had many extra men stationed due to the Passover) did not intervene (nor were they asked to), and why was Jesus not immediately arrested by either them or the temple police?

So if this was a symbolic act, who was it for and what was it’s purpose... there are several possibilities:

1. The dramatization of a long-overdue purification of the temple from defilement (of which commerce was the most obvious symptom). And despite the market sellers having a justified reason- corruption could still be rife.
2. The symbolic destruction of the old temple in anticipation of its replacement by Jesus as the New Temple (cf. Jn. 2:19).
3. Jesus was just violent, and this episode demonstrates his hostility toward others and their sacred space (contrast this with the previous view!).

I think we can all discount number 3

But the more I think about it the more the passage operates on so many levels. John was a literary genius. And when Jesus did something it often had meanings on multiple levels that speak to different people.

For me and how Jesus interacted after this act, it feels like prophetic action, and was a symbolic destruction of the old temple in anticipation of its replacement by Jesus as the New Temple.

This has a ring of truth about it especially since Jesus said that the sign he would give of his prophetic office, and his right to cleanse the temple (through his prophetic act) would be his own resurrection.

Which is why John highlights this. This is why it is in the Lenten calendar too. What John is trying to establish is that Jesus is God's Son. And that Jesus proves his divinity, on his way to the cross, to show he is the only one worthy to atone for our sins. He even explains to the Jews that He will be the temple. There will be no need for there to be ONLY one place for people to meet with God.

Despite this looking like quite a startling act. I believe that in all of Jesus works he time and time again shows compassion, mercy and kindness. All that He does is restorative and redemptive.

In the book Killing Enmity Thomas Nuffield writes this about Jesus

"This brings up the question of redemptive violence... if Jesus violated the personhood of others through his aggressive acts, then perhaps we could say he used redemptive violence. But he never seems to do anything other than advocate for the highest expression of personhood for everyone in the scene.

He wants his Jewish brethren to be the persons they're called to be (e.g. – light to the nations), and he wants Gentiles to be able to come into places of prayer to meet with GOD!

So – he forces out, cleanses, and aggressively removes that which impedes personhood, worship, relationship, and mission. My conviction is that Jesus' actions were directed at the things that were hurting people."

The gospel writers framed the scene as a prophetic act by someone acting as God's plenipotentiary (e.g., recall Jesus use of prophetic texts in Zech. 14:21, Is. 56:7, Jer. 7:11, etc. that correspond to his prophetic actions).

John was **not** seeming to be telling the story in order to advance an ethical teaching moment about how to use violence the "Jesus-way."

So, what does this mean for us? Why is it relevant this Lenten time?

Jesus action, as it is narrated by the evangelists, is a direct confrontation of the Jews violence (using a much more robust definition of violence), and their **failure in their stewardship of the temple**, and their failure to embrace and live their vocation/mission to the Gentiles.

Thus, Jesus prophetic action in the temple is **not** an example of using force and violence to either physically harm or to oppress another, **but it is rather a prophetic and loving act intended to show God's heart to provide a way for the nations to come to him in prayer!**

This is a huge act of love. Jesus is saying he will be the place where people can come to be clean. Forgiven and set free. He is saying he will be the sacrifice.

For me this passage leaves me with a few thoughts for us here in St.Mary's:

I know that we have festivals. This is a very good thing. It helps the church to keep going. I encourages the wider community to engage and walk through the church's doors.

I think for us here the message of this passage focusses more on the motivations of the people Jesus was turning out of the Temple.

Jesus turned the temple on it's head because yes sure the market sellers had a right to be there, and were not unlawful in the job. But that I believe they had corrupted their purpose. They had instead of providing access to the Lord through selling the sacrificial offerings where denying access by making it solely about the money or status.

When we engage with others inside the church in festivals or even services, I think it is wise that we think about our motivations. Is it for selfish reasons alone?

Or

Are we doing this to sustain the ministry and build faith, and create a community of LOVE, mercy and kindness. To reach those in need rather than exclude them. From my experience here...