

Zeal

3rd Sunday in Lent (B) – 3/3/24

“Zeal for your house will consume me.” Psalm 69:10a, qtd. in John 2:17.

I must confess that this is one of my favorite gospel stories. Jesus walks onto the Temple grounds, sees some people ripping other people off and thereby profaning the place, and deals with it. Memorably. He goes all Bull-in-a-China-Shop on whoever he can find who’s doing the ripping and, in so doing, making a mockery of whatever God or religion these people think they’re serving. He tells them why as he tells them off – “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a marketplace!” – and in a tone of voice that will brook no opposition.

Who among us hasn’t wanted to do something like that? Walk into a loan-shark outfit, a payday lender, or a credit card issuer – but I repeat myself – and start breaking things. Push a meth lab or a sweatshop off a cliff once we make sure no-one’s inside it or right under where we expect it to land. Sidle on up to the local Scrooge or Simon Legree and give them a kick in the shins. Get amidst insurrectionists and stand, righteous and surrect among them, until the opportunity arises to correct them, or correct for them. One could argue that the money-changers at the temple get worse treatment than Satan himself last week. That snake was told simply to get behind. By contrast, these people not told anything, not before Jesus starts whipping the sin out of them.

Perhaps that’s not a bad thing. After all, when people ask you “What would Jesus do?” remind them that reaching for the whip, whatever that might mean in the particular context, is one canonical option. Not that I advocate violence; I just report the news – you might say, I report the Good News. A passage like this shocks us,

though, because we're used to, "Blessèd are the peacemakers" and "Do unto others as you'd have done unto you," not to mention Jesus telling Peter to put away his sword in the face of heavily-armed men about to arrest him. Such irenicism from Jesus tends to make us seek rather to settle conflicts than to win them, or avoid them if we can. Yet it remains the responsibility of the good and the just to oppose unjust laws and wicked regimes, even though even nonviolent direct action against such things is rarely met with unicorns and butterflies by those who hold in thrall most of the men with guns. As for Jesus's rather non-nonviolent action – how to say this delicately? – some say that it didn't exactly make it harder for the Sanhedrin to vote to convict him.

Note that Jesus's relationship to the law was complex. He came not to abolish it but to fulfill it – the laws of Moses, that is. The laws of Rome, being laws imposed by an occupying power – them he rather came to get rid of, as a consequence of changing everything. As any Pharisee could have told you, Rome's laws had no authority where they were at variance with the laws of Moses. They had power, but not justice. That's what all the protests and revolts were about. Roman might could not make Rome right, though it could unleash two thousand years of wrong. One could not comply fully with Rome's laws without running afoul of what the Lord had told the people they had to do, is my point. Driving money-changers out of the Temple as Jesus did, that is, might well be fully in compliance with the laws of Moses. For this reason, the 'Go forth and do likewise' on this passage means to me that we must oppose the evils and injustices of our time without making them worse. We must do so without undermining Equal Justice Under Law, even if some of those empaneled to uphold that core value appear to undermine it, democracy, autonomy, and human decency every chance they get.

Are we too passive in the face of evils that need active, effective opposition if they're ever going to end? I ask 'Are we?', but I first should ask, 'Am I'? Righteousness, as well as charity, begin at home, but they don't end there. I came across a depressingly long list this week of all the individuals and institutions that we in this country had hoped would stanch the spread of fascism without our having to do much more than cheer them on, except that they haven't. It may be up to us. It may have always been up to us. "If not us, who? If not now, when?" Who was it who asked that? Jesus's behavior in the Temple forecourt in this morning's Good News report does rather bring such questions to the fore.

Yet, let me be clear. This is no riot, and Jesus is no looter. Caesar's head on the money that was the proximate cause of the problem, the reason why people needed to change Roman money into Temple gold to make their offerings. (Something about no graven images and the worship of idols.) The more basic problem is human greed, corrupting the 2nd Temple as it has corrupted so many others. Jesus's whips are trying to whip people away from that. He's not trying to take their money for himself. His what-you-might-call corrective direct action is another sign of his power. The others include healing the sick, raising the dead, being raised after three days (as he said to those questioning his whip of cords), proclaiming the Good News, walking on water, making water become wine, and making bread and fish out of nothing at all.

Nothing Jesus did in any such act was selfish or self-serving. He didn't steal anything that day at the Temple, and not at any of his days at the Temple. Not one little drachma, not one wee turtledove. He made them, perhaps, easier for others to steal. Maybe not the doves; they just flew away, first circling around to make sure they remembered never to come back here. But maybe some of the money. Temple money, Roman money, I don't know. Spill coins on the ground and the very stones

will rise up and bear it away, if no-one else does. “Whose head is on that coin?” Jesus asks on a calmer occasion. “Give it to him.” So maybe, in disrupting business in his Father’s house on that day, he made it so that some of the last could get a little closer to being first, money-wise. Worse things have resulted, here and there, from righteous indignation.

Meanwhile: his disciples have been watching this go on, and have a bit of scripture at the ready: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” It comes from Psalm 69, and it is not exactly a pleasant confession. The gospel writer knows that, even if the disciples don’t. Hear the whole verse, with the others closest to it:

⁸ Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach,
and shame has covered my face.

⁹ I have become a stranger to my own kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.

¹⁰ Zeal for your house has eaten me up;
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.

¹¹ I humbled myself with fasting,
but that was turned to my reproach.

¹² I put on sack-cloth also,
and became a byword among them.

The rest of Psalm 69 has the speaker begging for the Lord to show mercy and help out. What actually happens is that things get worse. Take, *e.g.*, verse 23: “They gave me gall to eat, and when I was thirsty, [...] vinegar to drink.” Cue the sponge of sour wine someone pushed in his face as he hung dying on Golgotha. “For they persecute him whom you have stricken / and add to the pain of those who you have pierced”

(Ps.69:28). Yes, they do. What to do about it? Jesus said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The psalmist had other ideas: “Lay to their charge guilt upon guilt, / and let them not receive your vindication” (Ps.69:29) and “Let them be wiped out of the book of the living / and not be written among the righteous” (Ps.69:30). To forgive, or to erase? The answer might well turn on whether ‘they’ actually do know what they are doing.

English, Latin, Greek, and the Bible itself have never been of one mind regarding ‘zeal’. ‘Zeal’ is straight out of Latin’s *zelus*, which transliterates Greek’s *zelos*. Zeal “[denotes] ardent feeling or fervour (taking the form of love, wrath, ‘jealousy’, or righteous indignation) with contextual tendency to unfavorable implications (emulation, rivalry, partisanship)” (OED *sb.1*). Our great early translators of the English Bible – Wyclif, Coverdale, Tyndale, Andrewes, *et al.* – use it in both senses. A representative example comes from the AV (1611)’s version of Ezekiel 5:13: “Thus shall mine anger be accomplished, and I will cause my fury to rest upon them, and I will be comforted: and they shall know that I the Lord have spoken it in my zeal, when I have accomplished my fury in them.” The Lord is speaking through Ezekiel in this passage, to Jerusalem and by extension to all the people of Israel and Judah. They’ve done terrible things, not least of which was having “defiled my sanctuary with...all thine abominations” (Ezek.5:11). Because they did so, the prophet reports, the Lord will show them no mercy.

For this reason, the zeal of the Lord, and zeal for the house of the Lord, trouble me much more than they reassure me. The same might be true for the writer of John. It might’ve been true for Jesus’s disciples. He’s got them worried, for two reasons: either the people he’s whipping will whip back harder, or he will not stop until he’s whipped the sin out of them all. Either way, his zeal is going to hurt. Will it also help? That depends; as the lawyers say, *cui bono*? To whom would it be (or do)

good? That good might justify zeal for it, but zeal alone cannot justify itself. The proof is not in the zeal, but in what you're zealing for. (Yes, "zeal" used to be a verb, too). "Zeal not death in the error of your life," goes the Roman Catholic Douay-Reims translation of Wisdom 1:12 (the AV has "Seek not"). Take care, that is, what you zeal for.

As Edward Ramsey, Dean of Edinburgh, writes in *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* in 1860 of a certain person of whom we would know more, "He joined with his drinking propensities a great zeal for the Episcopal Church" (v, ed. 6, 183, OED "zeal" *sb.* 4a). The Scottish Episcopal Church, that is – the one that ordained our first American bishop after Independence. It takes three bishops, as you know, to make a fourth – and it is said that wherever there are four Episcopalians, you can always find a fifth. I'll have to wait till my copy of that book arrives to find out whether this fellow's love of liquor meant more the barley or the grape, and to what extent his zeal for our other-mother church involved much whipping. *Amen.*