

Sunday 3 March 2024

Fr David's Sermon

'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look on me, a little child.'

I wonder if any of you ever sung that at Sunday School? I never went to Sunday School, but that's another story. At Lent group on Wednesday, we discussed Scriptural references to God's anger, found more often but not exclusively in the Old Testament. The writer of our 'Pilgrim' course suggested that if God is angry, it is because God loves us so much. Just as we might be angry with a child who is behaving in a way that we feel is wrong or damaging, because we love them.

The Jesus in today's Gospel reading is certainly not gentle, meek or mild. He goes into the Jerusalem Temple and drives out those who are exchanging money and selling animals to be sacrificed in worship. John alone adds that he made a whip, heightening the sense of rage. He knocks over the money changers' tables, spilling their money, and shouts at them to get out. The other three Gospel writers place this story after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. They have it as the cause of the religious leaders plotting to destroy Jesus. John places it early on so that we might read the rest of the story in the light of it.

As so often, John also changes and deepens the story. Firstly, it is not, or not just, teaching against commercialism in the Temple or in churches. Despite what people tell me when they're complaining about Cathedral shops and entry charges. In Mark's account, Jesus says that Scripture says 'My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations'. And yet Gentiles were not allowed to go beyond their own court on pain of death. The sacrificial animals could not be paid for in Gentile money, hence the need for money changers. Thus, the Temple was anything but a house of prayer for all nations.

In Mark, the Jewish leaders challenge Jesus about what gives him authority to do such things. In John, they ask him what sign he can show them. Remember we are at the start of this Gospel, where Jesus is going to go on to perform signs, culminating in the ultimate sign of his death and resurrection. Hence, Jesus' enigmatic response: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. A classic piece of Johannine 'double entendre'. For his challengers take it literally but the Gospel writer comments that he (Jesus) was speaking of his body. The body that would be sacrificed on the cross. The Lamb of God that would replace the Passover lambs. The body of Christ which would replace the temple as the true holy place, and indeed be for all nations. The body of Christ that would be eaten by his followers in order that they too might become his body on earth.

Since we are the Body of Christ, should we too sometimes be rightly angry in his name? I don't know about you but, as a nice middle-class Church of England child, I was brought up to regard anger as something unpleasant and to be avoided. Yet I do believe that we should sometimes be angry because of our faith. I am angry when I see homeless beggars on the streets of London, so many people having to use food banks, sick people, including from our congregation, waiting for hours to be treated in hospital corridors. I could go on!

However, I think there are two caveats to when we should be rightly angry. Firstly, a bit like love, there are four words for anger in the Scriptures. They range from the dangerous rage that can result from our being fearful or provoked. A rage that can be terribly destructive, as those of us who have been watching 'The Jury: Murder Trial' on Channel 4 have been reminded. Despite the lovely scenes filmed in 'The Crown' and in our own beautiful church. At the other end of the

scale is indeed righteous anger, directed towards a settled purpose like protecting the innocent or righting wrongs.

Yet even here, we fallible human beings should be careful. It can be both useful and dangerous, because it is so easy to delude ourselves that we are using it properly. We need the Holy Spirit to help us discern who and what our 'righteous' anger serves, who it is for. 1

Jesus' critique of the temple worship system was, in a way, fulfilled when the temple was destroyed in 70AD and the sacrificial side of Jewish worship ended. One of my favorite hymns reminds us that no human buildings or systems, sacred or secular, are permanent: 'tower and temple fall to dust'.² When Christopher Wren was standing in the ruins of the old St Paul's Cathedral, which had been destroyed in the Fire of London, he wanted to mark the place that would be the center of the great dome he planned in his design of the new Cathedral. He asked a builder to bring him a flat stone from amidst the rubble. The workman handed him a broken chunk from a gravestone, on which just one word from the inscription remained: RESURGAM. Now this word is displayed outside the Cathedral under a carving of a phoenix, rising from the ashes.

In the midst of our anger, be it creative or destructive, Christ's resurrection brings renewal and new hope, for that Latin word means:

'I shall rise again'.

Amen.