

John 2:13-22

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."^[a]

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

There's two things that have been bothering me about Jesus clearing the temple, and something that didn't bother me.

What never seriously bothered me is that if Jesus made a whip out of cords to drive the animals out of the temple, and if he overturned the tables, was he in fact acting in violence? And should he have done this? — And my reply to that is that Jesus was justly angry, and I don't think tables, animals or people were hurt in this incident.

What does bother me is that whether the animals were inside the temple court or outside, people were going to buy pigeons or doves or sheep or goats or cattle for their sacrifices, and then take them to the temple for a sacrifice. So did it make much difference where the animals were being traded?

And secondly, Jesus was already expecting the temple's physical destruction, already knew he would replace the temple through his ministry, death and resurrection; and was already more completely the place that heaven touched earth and God met mankind than the temple could be. So why so sensitive for the dignity of the temple?

To answer the first question first, a significant reason to come to the temple was to make sacrifice, as a way of saying sorry to God, a way of restoring relationship with God. Making a sacrifice is a thoughtful moment — a moment of contrition and solemnity. Admitting our faults is sensitive, and needs to be handled sensitively. The making of a sacrifice is an act that deserves due preparation. It should be costly, to remind you that your sin is damaging to the world, that it has real consequences, often beyond our imagination.

The sacrifice itself matters, because it is the physical token of your apology to God. By analogy, if I've done something really awful and Sarah is upset, then I should buy her flowers. If it's a big apology, then I had better go to an actual florist and pick out her favourite flowers — because if I grab a bunch from the petrol station, she will know, and I will know — and the flowers might do more damage to our relationship than good. The flowers will tell her quite how sorry I am, and quite how much I care.

So, if I'm a first century Jew and I know I must make a sacrifice, but without due thought just rock up to the temple, buy some pigeons in the outer court and sacrifice them then it's likely I haven't really thought about what I'm doing. I haven't really expressed contrition. Which was the whole point of the exercise. The money changers and animal vendors

were *McDonaldising* relationship with God — making it all too easy, convenient and cheap. Or to put it another way, the temple was made into a giant vending machine. ‘Yer pays your money and yer gets yer transaction with God.’

Jesus drove the money changers and animal vendors out because this was about the relationship with God, and that still mattered. That was why Jesus was touchy about this. Let the temple be the temple — let the outer court be a suitable approach to the inner court. Come ready and prepared. This is not going to the bank to pay a bill, this is going to God’s house for the sake of relationship.

The temple had been the place where heaven touched earth, where God lived among his people. It was God’s house. Jesus, however, became the real place where heaven touched earth, where our sins were forgiven, and where we met with the living God. This should transform this tendency to reduce our relationship to a transaction, right?

I’m sure it did and it does — but there have been exceptions. In the middle-ages the church sold indulgences. If you were wealthy you could pay your way out of guilt, it seemed. Money apparently equated to virtue in that economy.

For us it might be rattling off grace before a meal, without thought. Or rattling off prayers and intercessions. Or charity standing orders that are generous, but now thoughtless.

I often feel in danger of going through the motions of prayer. Saying it mechanically, but not truly praying with heart, mind and soul. Failing to listen in prayer. Being so busy, that I can’t find the stillness to *really* pray.

The same may be true for other ways we connect with God. Whatever we may be dropping, or taking up, during Lent... is it for the God’s sake, or for our sake, or because it’s the done thing?

Jesus went into the temple and saw money changers and animal sellers, and he drove them out. A human economy had replaced the economy of grace and relationship that the Temple had been supposed to represent and to help. The thing that got Jesus most angry was people kidding themselves and kidding each other that they were behaving exactly as God desired. Jesus’s righteous anger is very telling at this moment. He was passionate that relationship with God be sincere.

Let’s pray:

As we continue our journey through Lent, we pray for the Holy Spirit to open our ears to hear God’s word in Jesus; to open our eyes to see with God’s eyes, and to open our hearts, that we might love, as Jesus has loved us.

Amen.