

Lent 3B 2018 – Trinity Cathedral

It seems strange to have the story of Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple read on this Sunday in Lent. We usually think of it as coming in Holy Week, toward the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry, right after the Palm Sunday story, the so-called "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. In fact, that **is** where Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this story – setting up the conflict between Jesus and the authorities which eventually led to his arrest, trial and crucifixion later that week.

But John, the Gospel writer we are following today, for his own purposes, has this event happen early in Jesus' ministry. His gospel has Jesus going to Jerusalem several times during the course of his three year public ministry rather than only once at its conclusion. And John was interested, not so much in the conflict between Jesus and the Roman government, as he was between Jesus and his own religion's leaders!

Even though he was a complete outsider to the power structure of the Temple, Jesus here issues a challenge to the authority of the Temple itself that really shakes it to its foundations. By throwing the money changers out of the Temple, and letting loose the sacrificial animals, he throws the mechanics of Temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one its most significant feasts so that neither tithes nor sacrifices could be offered that day.

The implication is that Jesus is claiming authority to challenge the supremacy of the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God **in the world**, not in the Temple. The Kingship, the Reign, the Sovereignty **not** of the **Temple**, but of God alone!

Now, none of this should be interpreted as meaning that Jesus was advocating the superiority of some new religion called Christianity over the old religion, Judaism. Jesus was an observant Jew who (according to John) traveled to Jerusalem regularly for the major holy days. Jesus taught and observed the Ten Commandments we had as our First Reading this morning – including the first two about worshipping God and God alone, and not making anything (even the Temple) into an idol!

No, Jesus' challenge was not to Judaism itself, but to the authority of a dominant religious institution **within** Judaism – the Temple and temple worship. And he did that – not because he's anti-Jewish (how could he be?) – but because he stands in the long line of Hebrew prophets like Amos and Jeremiah who challenged a

religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God. (See New Interpreter's Bible; Volume 9, page 545)

A religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God!

And that, dear friends, is where all this begins to apply to us.

We hear a lot today about people -- and not only younger people -- who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." For many of them that means they believe in God, may admire the figure of Jesus, pray from time to time, and believe in some kind of life after death. But they are not terribly interested in what we sometimes call "the institutional church."

They perceive us as being hopelessly out of touch with the contemporary world they live in. They shake their heads at our "church wars" over changing liturgies or the ordination of women, or the place of gays and lesbians in the church. Yet, many of these folks are very generous with their time and talent and treasure given to causes they **believe** in and often in direct service to the poor themselves.

Yet they wonder why we spend so much of our time, money and energy on maintaining church buildings and church governance structures that don't seem to have very much to do with Jesus or with his primary message to the world!

Now, surely there is a certain naivete in that kind of critique. Very few movements can survive, over time, without a *certain* institutionalization. You need some kind of structure to pass the message on from generation to generation.

And there's nothing wrong with beautiful cathedrals like this one built to the glory of God -- and maintaining them once they are built! But I think the average seeker might be forgiven for observing that we don't look much like followers of a poor, itinerant Jewish rabbi today. So we need to keep ever before us what the church is **for!**

Because, if we're going to take the message of Jesus in this morning's Gospel seriously, we need to recognize that he is challenging -- not only the Temple-centered Judaism of his day -- but the failures of the church...in our day!

Over the centuries, we Christians have allowed ourselves to be divided up, often over political rather than theological differences, into tens of thousands of

competing denominations. We spend way too much of our time competing for an ever-decreasing membership base by trying to demonstrate that our way of understanding God or worshipping God is better than theirs!

We have often locked ourselves only into fourth century ways of talking about God in our historic creeds and liturgies while failing to look for new language and new music which might actually be able to convey the God we have experienced to a new generation of seekers and searchers who desperately hunger for something of that same experience, even if they are not always fully conscious of that hunger themselves.

I don't think we have any idea what the church will be like 50 or 100 years from now. I expect it will look very different from the church we live in today. We can be either fearful of that kind of change and resist it with all our might or we can be open and flexible to see indeed "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" in our time.

We have to be willing ask ourselves where and when the status quo of our religious practices have become frozen, and therefore closed to the possibility of reformation, change and renewal. The great danger is that we in the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in Jesus' day, will fall into the trap of confusing the authority of our own institutions with the authority of God. And that, my friends, is what it means to worship an idol!

During these 40 days of Lent when we journey with Jesus in the wilderness, I invite you to be open to embrace whatever it is that God is up to in our day. You have wonderful opportunities to do just that in your readings from "The Good Book Club" and discussing passages from Luke's Gospel (and your own faith) over the soup suppers as well as in the amazing outreach this Cathedral is involved in these days.

Michelle Crouch's teaching on health, leading up to Krista Tippet's conference on April 12, as well as Mary Hogg's study on the great figure of David provide yet two more opportunities. And the Lenten Organ Series on Wednesdays invites you to encounter God through the beauty of sacred music

I invite you to take this Lenten season of discernment seriously – for surely not everything that is "new," or **claims** to be **of God, is** of God.

But I do believe God is calling us into a kind of new reformation in our day. And if we are to be faithful to that calling, it will require us to be open and to travel

light, but at the same time to ground ourselves ever more deeply in prayer and in study and in mission.

And Lent rolls around every year to remind us that, as long as we are grounded in God, we need have no fear of changing times or changing circumstances. For it is God alone that we serve.

God is our rock...and our salvation!