

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The *Temple Incident* is the subject of our gospel lesson this morning on the third Sunday in Lent. This event occurs after the miracle at Cana which resulted in the disciples being converted into active believers in their Lord. John's gospel is, as we have mentioned before, *a gospel of signs*. Throughout John's account, these signs point to the divinity of Jesus. "But they are understood as such only by those who *choose* to see them, who *choose* to be convinced of his identity as the Messiah.

It is significant that John places this incident early in the public ministry of Jesus. In the Synoptic accounts, this event occurs in the last week of Jesus' life, just after his entry into Jerusalem. As is true of the other gospel writers, here it occurs in the context of the Passover. However, there is an important distinction between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics: John visualizes a three-year ministry, and the others limit his public mission to one year. So, this means John assumes Jesus visited Jerusalem a number of times, whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us of just one visit.

We do not know precisely why the author of the fourth gospel chose to write the story in this way, but it is possible that he is making a theological point. In John, "the Temple altercation marks the beginning of conflict with the Jewish leadership and thus provides a thematic struggle early in the gospel that will serve to define the course of the narrative." Here, then, the Temple incident is a prominent sign (one of seven) and the climactic narrative which exemplifies the power of Jesus over death, the final enemy.

By comparing John's treatment of this event with that of the other three evangelists, we can begin to see the reason for the differences. In Matthew, the concern is with fulfillment of scripture so the triumphal entry into Jerusalem precedes the Temple incident. The act of having Jesus riding into the city to cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David" establishes Jesus as Messiah-King. In Mark, the incident is linked to the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus preventing people from carrying vessels containing animals for sacrifice shows that the Temple's sacrificial system is judged harshly by God; the system is cursed just as the fig tree was cursed. This represents God's judgment on Israel. Luke wishes to present the temple in a positive light (because Jesus as Messiah is the Davidic king entering Jerusalem in triumph), so he omits any reference to a violent protest in the temple. Rather, he depicts Jesus as cleansing the temple while preparing it for his own teaching.

John understands Jesus to be an observant Jew, regularly traveling to Jerusalem for the festivals. There is actually nothing in the event as described which suggests that Jesus viewed Temple practices as unclean. The fact is that the system required the sacrifice of many animals, so such an expensive operation required funds to sustain it. Also, there is actually nothing in John's text to suggest that Jesus was punishing the act of profiteering by corrupt temple officials, although some insist on interpreting it in this way.

Thus, the actual story in John tells us that he viewed the incident as being a prophetic act. Jesus symbolically disrupted the normal activities of the Temple, and the action of tipping over and driving out seems to point to a violent event affecting the operation of the Temple system. In this way, John appears to explicitly link the action of “the incident” to the destruction of the Temple which actually occurred in 70 C.E. In John, Jesus’ action in the Temple anticipates *both* his own death *and* the destruction of the center of Jewish worship in the first century.

In developing his story line, John introduces “the Jews;” however, if we are to view this term correctly, the people referred to should be seen as only “those Israelites who oppose Jesus, who actively refuse to consider him the Messiah, and who actively seek to still his voice and his testimony.” In John’s account, from this point forward, his opponents grow more strident and emphatic in their opposition to Jesus.” And this is a vital element in the story, because as explained in the prologue to the gospel, *“he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”*

From a modern perspective, “cleansing” of the temple does not seem to convey what is really going on in this incident. If he had actually cleansed the temple, he would have reformed it, changed it in some fundamental way, but that isn’t what’s going on here. What appears to be happening in this story is that Jesus is “doing away with (the temple’s) idolatrous economic infrastructure,” rather than “cleaning up the market system that operated the Temple.” This is particularly appropriate in that Jesus visited the Temple at a time when Israel celebrated its liberation from slavery in Egypt at the *Passover*. In other words, Jesus was here simply carrying out an extension of that original act of liberation. Recall that he entered the holy city after carrying out an extensive ministry in Galilee “preaching a spiritual and economic egalitarianism.” In all four canonical accounts, Jesus --- rather than finding people celebrating their liberation by Yahweh in the Exodus --- found a corrupted system maintaining the “economic caste system.” He entered the temple and was enraged by what he found there.

In the Temple, Jesus found both “sellers” and “changers.” The sellers sold animals for sacrifice. The changers sat outside the building in “the court of the gentiles.” They were required in a world that was operating with a number of different currencies, all of which had to be converted into units of value which could cover the costs of maintaining temple worship. This involved a certain amount of currency speculation, and the changers functioned as banks at that time. The money changers were corrupt. They exaggerated fees and inflated the exchange rate. The result was that the costs of worship were higher than they needed to be, and the poor in particular suffered as a result. The response of Jesus to all of this was to make a whip, drive the money changers out of the temple, pour out the coins they had collected, turn over the trading tables, and demand that the changers stop turning the worship of God into a method of exploitation of the poor. Finally, he pronounced the destruction of the Temple which took place later ---- in 70 C.E., at the conclusion of the war with Rome.

To fully appreciate what this entailed and what it meant, we have only to imagine the scene as viewed by N. T. Wright, the pre-eminent New Testament scholar: “*The Temple was the beating heart of Judaism. It wasn’t just ...a church on a street corner. It was the center of worship and music, of politics and society, of national celebration and mourning. It was also the place where you would find more animals (both alive and dead) than anywhere else. But towering above all these, it was of course the place where Israel’s God, Yahweh, had promised to live in the midst of his people. It was the focal point of the nation, and of the national way of life.*”

You will recall that John, unlike the other evangelists, places this incident at the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus. What is the point of this? Well, it is likely that “what John wants us to understand is (that) what Jesus did in the Temple is a hint at the new meaning he is giving to Passover... and a hint of what he thinks of the Temple itself.” He knows that it is corrupt, for sure, but what his text seems to be pointing to is the notion that *Jesus himself* “is the true Temple: he is the Word made flesh, the place where the glory of God has chosen to make his dwelling” Jesus is the “reality to which the Temple itself points.” And his resurrection will be “the reality to which the whole Passover celebration points.”

Jesus “throws the mechanics of temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one of the most significant feasts of the year so that neither sacrifices nor tithes could be offered.” He “challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God.” His action “intimates that the temple (complex) itself is not necessary.” The temple to which Jesus refers “is not the temple in Jerusalem but *the temple of his (own) body.*”

And the whole incident is a foreshadowing of the resurrection and the ascension. Thus, Jesus is telling the authorities that he is the presence of God. Clearly, this incident at the temple tells us that there was “conflict *at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry,*” and that conflict increased as Jesus made more and more claims which angered the religious authorities and the rulers of the country. And that is why we are re-telling this story on this third Sunday in Lent as we anticipate the Passion of Our Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources

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