

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT-YR B
March 4, 2018

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Gospel: John 2:13-22

One of the blogs that I stumbled upon this week featured a painting depicting the incident in today's gospel, usually referred to as cleansing the temple. Photoshopped over the image was the bold-texted question: "If someone asks 'What would Jesus do?' remind them that turning over tables and breaking out whips is a possibility." The blogger, a Jesuit priest, then detailed some of the ways that today's Gospel passage has been used throughout Christian history to justify violence. Burning heretics, the Crusades, and "Just Wars" (to name a few examples) have been legitimized in religious circles since St. Augustine in the 4th century, by pointing to Jesus' actions in the temple as a proof text that Jesus was not against violence.

A close reading of this text, and of its parallels in each of the three synoptic Gospels, fails to support such an interpretation. None of these versions of this event indicate Jesus doing violence to any person, and using braided cords to move cattle and sheep was simply standard operating procedure for shepherds.

The writer of the Gospel of John links this event to "Zeal for your house" from the prophet Jeremiah. This prophetic reference reminds me of a minor thread found in the Hebrew Scriptures indicating that God was not always pleased with the animal sacrifices made in the temple, if they were not accompanied by concern for the destitute and oppressed.

Isaiah 1:11, 16 "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ... remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good: seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Hosea 6:6 "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

Psalms 51: "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Abbot Andrew Marr, an Anglican Benedictine, proposes that the objections raised by the prophets have at their root a suspicion that animal sacrifice is deeply problematic. Marr writes that "... it is argued that the prophets thought the temple sacrifices were acceptable, maybe even laudable, if accompanied with righteous actions in the social sphere, but they seem to have a sneaky suspicion that the practice of sacrifice tends to *encourage* social injustice." And perhaps(?) encouraged the notion slaughter might be acceptable.

It is not a huge leap from these Old Testament ideas to Jesus' saying (in Mark 9:13) 'Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' " But it IS a huge leap for those who dutifully came to the temple to offer their sacrifices to God. Jesus' vehement objections to

turning the temple into an emporium for currency changing and selling animals for sacrifice indicate a full-out change in how the religious covenant with God is lived out

Essentially, Jesus says “The temple is finished, and I will take its place” (Gil Baillie). We can hardly imagine how outrageous that would have sounded at that time. But that is the point of Jesus discourse in today’s Gospel about destroying the temple and him rebuilding it in three days. The locus of encounter with God no longer will be situated in the animal sacrifices at the temple, but encounter with God will be in Jesus the Christ. It is a stunning change, and no wonder the listeners were shocked and did not understand.

We may be tempted to see ourselves as far removed from the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem temple. We no longer offer the goats and bulls and doves and their blood as part of our religious rituals. Ah, how much more civilized and spiritually mature are we than these ancient Judeans! Or so we think in a dangerously self-satisfied way. And yet our

... logic of sacrifice (remains) that some living being (were) always dispensable precisely as the victims of collective violence at the times of social crises and their deaths “necessary.” Caiaphas stated the sacrificial logic baldly when he said that it was better “to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50) In modern times this sacrificial logic is expressed by the regretful term ‘collateral damage.’
(Andrew Marr, OSB).

I cannot help but think that that sacrificial logic and acceptance of collateral damage still lingers among human kind centuries after Jesus turned the tables in Jerusalem. As Lent continues, I suggest that we ponder in all seriousness who and what we, as a society, continue to be willing to sacrifice on what altars:

The gifts and contributions of young people and adults without immigration documents on the altar of government bureaucracy and American protectionism?

The health and lives of those experiencing illnesses of mind or body on the altar of the profit motive in health care insurance?

The gifts and contributions and the very lives of people of color on the altar of systemic racism and ?

The blood and lives of schoolchildren and teachers sacrificed on the altar of easy access to assault weapons?