

Sermon preached by the Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane, April 3, 2007. Tuesday in Holy Week

In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, AMEN.

It's the third day of Holy Week. We gather quietly these evenings to mark the final days and hours of our Lenten journey, and to reflect on the stories of Jesus' final days, between the hosannas of his palm-strewn arrival in Jerusalem and the mockery of his thorn-crowned death on the cross.

Tonight's gospel reading from Mark is my least favorite of these Holy Week texts. I'm always hard pressed to know what to make of this story of an angry, acting-out Jesus. Jesus, with his eyes blazing, overturning tables, whip snapping in the air (although that is from John's version of the story), coins rolling, birds flying, merchants fleeing.

It makes for good movie footage, perhaps, but it just doesn't sit well with me. Jesus often makes me uncomfortable, of course. But I am much more comfortable with the Jesus who models doing *unpopular* things like touching the unclean, or hanging out with the dregs of society; I'm more comfortable with the Jesus who counsels doing *difficult* things, like turning the other cheek, and forgiving seventy times seven, or who invites *almost impossible* things, like selling all one has and giving the money to the poor, or giving a hungry crowd something to eat, when there seems to be no food; I'm even more comfortable with the Jesus who bids me follow in paths that are *sure to be painful*—take up your cross and follow me—than I am with this enraged prophet, pronouncing judgment on the Temple.

Because that is what seems to be going on here. Jesus is playing the prophet. We who are no longer familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures perhaps miss the reference, but Jesus is quoting from Isaiah and Jeremiah. He has, for the moment, placed himself in the tradition of Israel's great prophets—the ones whom God sends to call a wayward and disobedient Israel back to Godself; the ones through whom God speaks when Israel has become complacent, self-satisfied, and sure of God's favor.

The chief priests and scribes, hearing Jesus, on the other hand, knew exactly the context from which he was quoting—chapter 56 of Isaiah. There, Isaiah paints a picture of the temple—the place of God's presence—not as the exclusive possession of the Israelites—but as a house of prayer for *all peoples*. Isaiah prophesies not in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but in the name of the Lord God “who gathers the outcasts of Israel, and who will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

So here we have Jesus, who has ridden into town as the Messiah, quoting Isaiah, Israel's great prophet, in the great Temple of Jerusalem—and saying that the Jews do not have a monopoly on God's favor. That can hardly be good news to the temple authorities, on this the feast of the Passover—the festival that marks Jewish identity as God's chosen people. Sure enough, Mark writes that “when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.”

Next, Jesus quotes from Jeremiah, the prophet whom God raised up to call Israel to account for her unfaithfulness and injustice. He quotes from chapter 7, in which God calls Jeremiah to go and stand in the gateway of the temple and tell those gathered there that they must amend their ways. Who does that sound like? Jesus *is* Jeremiah here. “If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, *then* I will dwell with you in this place”. But if you do not, Jeremiah prophesies, the simple fact that you call this the temple of the Lord will not save you.

Jeremiah goes on “Here you are trusting in deceptive words—this is the temple of the Lord-- to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not know, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say “we are safe!” only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”

*That’s* the context of Jesus calling the Temple a “den of robbers”—Israel has stolen the name of God, and claimed it as theirs, when they are not behaving as God calls them to behave. Those who claim to be God’s chosen, but fail to do God’s work among the suffering are a den of robbers. We more often interpret this as an indictment of those who were charging exorbitant rates to change the money of the Passover pilgrims into local currency—and that may, in fact, deserve Jesus’ wrath—but I think his condemnation is for the whole religious establishment, not just the money changers. Like in Jeremiah’s day, Israel is so convinced of God’s favor, calling herself and the temple by God’s name, that she has forgotten to be about God’s business of caring for the poor and outcast outside the temple gates.

So here again, we have Jesus, whom the people have acclaimed “the one who comes in the name of the Lord” standing in the temple, and quoting Jeremiah... whose prophecy concludes that Israel will lose God’s favor and be cast out of God’s sight because she has failed to do justice and mercy. And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

I think maybe our Holy Week movies have got it all wrong. It’s not the overturning of tables and driving out the moneychangers that is the focus of this story, but the blow Jesus is striking to the very identity of Israel as the chosen people of God. If, as John McDuffie suggested in his Palm Sunday sermon, Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem was political street theater, designed as a slap in the face to Roman rule, then maybe Jesus’ overturning the tables in the temple is also street theater, designed to be a slap in the face to the religious establishment.

And perhaps Jesus slaps at the face of the church, too, this Tuesday night in Holy Week. Perhaps I am uncomfortable with Mark’s story because it threatens my identity as one of

God's chosen, because it challenges me not to hide behind my piety, here in the House of the Lord, during this festival when we state most clearly our identity as Christians—those who follow a crucified and risen Lord.

Because I *do* recognize in this uncomfortable story of the angry Jesus who overturns the moneychanger's tables and drives them from the temple the kind and compassionate Jesus who hangs out with the dregs of society, challenges us to forgive, and throws lavish picnics—the Jesus with whom I am more comfortable. But perhaps it is my—our—very comfort with the Jesus who asks of us unpopular, difficult and painful things that is the problem.

This Holy Week story stands as a warning. We must take care that we are not so caught up in the religion *about* Jesus that we neglect to actually do the *work* of Jesus outside the doors of our own temple. Lest we, too become a den of robbers, claiming a stolen identity as God's chosen, we must be about the work of gathering the outcasts, feeding the hungry, binding up the broken hearted and acting justly with one another. We must take care that we do not become so comfortable with calling ourselves Christians that we forget to do the work of the Christ in the world.

Overturn our complacent hearts, Lord Christ, that trade in complacency and the currency of right belief. Drive us from the security of the house that we have built for you, into the streets where we may behold you broken and given for the life of all, and where with our Creator and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God forever and ever. AMEN.