

John 2:13-22 New International Version

Jesus Clears the Temple Courts

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 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. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."^[a]

The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 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.

Jesus clears the temple courts. John 2. A talk by Janice Nelson

We have a dramatic scene in today's reading from John. Jesus makes a whip and drives out cows, sheep and doves from the part of the temple set aside for gentiles and the poor. Can you imagine the chaos? There are stampeding animals, irate traders, upturned tables and coins flying in all directions. This image of an angry Jesus does not seem consistent with the gentle Jesus, meek and mild that we were taught about in Sunday School. What has happened? Why the anger? Is the anger justified? How will the authorities respond to this scene?

We are reading a very early chapter in John, and Jesus is right at the beginning of his ministry. The other gospels have the cleansing of the temple much later, shortly before the crucifixion, and it is likely that this very provocative action was instrumental in the authorities arresting and charging Jesus, and we all know how that ended. Some speculate that Jesus cleansed the temple on two occasions, but it is more likely that John has altered the timeline of events for liturgical reasons, or to set the scene for Jesus' confrontation with the religious establishment throughout his ministry.

You might wonder why there were traders in the temple courtyards. This was Passover, one of the major events of the year, celebrating the flight from Egypt. The people of Judea had obligations; the temple tax, half a shekel (about \$8 today) was generally paid at this time, and animal sacrifices were an essential part of the role of the temple. It wasn't acceptable to offer just any old coin or animal either. The people attending the Passover in Jerusalem were from all over the place, and the money they brought with them had to be changed into a suitable currency, just as we change our money when we travel overseas. It was possible to bring lambs or doves from the farmyard at home, but often those animals were not considered perfect enough, and another transaction would have to take place. On the face of it, those traders had a legitimate reason to be there. How could the temple function properly without them?

So if Jesus is angry, why was Jesus so angry? It could be that he was disgusted by the noise and the animal manure everywhere, which hardly created an atmosphere suitable for quiet prayer, even if the outer part of the temple was only intended for gentiles and the poor. He states that the traders have turned God's house into a market place, or 'den of thieves' according to other gospels. I can identify with that. I feel ripped off when I have to change money into another currency, and I lose some of the value of my money to the currency exchange trader, just like that, for very little effort on their part it seems to me. It may well be that Jesus' anger is in solidarity with the poor of the nation, who really struggle to save enough to pay the temple tax. There are Roman taxes to be paid too, and for the wealthy traders to be taking their cut is just not fair! The Essenes did not even have money, so taxes were especially problematic for them.

This was not the only time Jesus visited the temple, far from it. All men over the age of 12 were obligated to attend the Jerusalem temple at least three times a year, for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. The Jerusalem temple was a huge and very impressive building, one of the finest buildings in the Roman Empire. The extension of the second temple was initiated by Herod the Great, but built over many decades and occupied 35 acres of land. It must have been ludicrous for Jesus to say that this massive complex could be pulled down, and that he could rebuild it in three days. How would you have reacted to a statement like that? You might wonder why Jesus is challenging the authorities in this manner. The temple had taken 46 years to build, and of course it couldn't be rebuilt in three days.

The temple was in fact destroyed by the Roman Army in 70 AD. All that is left now are the great stones of the wailing wall. There has not yet been an opportunity to rebuild it in two thousand years, let alone three days! The temple was so central to Jewish worship, it had been central to Jewish faith for over a thousand years, and its destruction was devastating. The Jewish followers of Jesus eventually came to an understanding that the crucifixion of Jesus was a one off sacrifice for all time, and that animal sacrifices would no longer be central. The non-messianists also struggled to cope, and when it was obvious that the temple was not going to be rebuilt any time soon, eventually decided that acts of loving kindness would have to suffice in place of animal sacrifice.

It is also quite possible that Jesus was not angry at all, and that the cleansing of the temple was a planned symbolic event. The synoptic gospels report that this event took place shortly after the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem shortly before Passover. He entered the city as a King, with many followers accompanying him. There are at least two other occasions recorded in the Jewish scriptures, early in the reigns of Zedekiah and Josiah, when an incoming King ceremoniously cleansed the temple after a period of Baal worship, so it would make sense for Jesus to do the same after such a long period of governance by Pontius Pilate and the temple priests who collaborated with the Roman occupiers. He was reclaiming Judea and the temple for the Jewish people with himself as King and Messiah.

Unfortunately, we soon hear the cry "Under what authority have you done this?" Many people backed him, but not all, and especially not those temple priests who were doing quite well under the Roman occupiers, and didn't want to upset the applecart. This does not end well, as we all know. Arrest follows, there is a trial, he is handed over to the Romans, and the people are given a choice, Jesus or Barabbas. Who is to live, and who is to die? It is hard for us to comprehend why the crowd would choose Barabbas over Jesus. A horrible death follows.

We have probably all heard that politics should stay out of religion, and fair enough in one way, since we all have such divergent opinions, and relationships could well break down. Are we creating an artificial boundary though? Religion relates to the whole of life. Should we stay silent when there are major injustices happening, or is it appropriate to consider such issues in our weekly worship? It seems to me that Jesus was political, he stood up for those disadvantaged for whatever reason, he argued with the authorities of the time and he made an attempt to claim kingship over Judea in defiance of the Romans and their collaborators within Judea.

If there are justice issues we feel strongly about, how can we make a difference, and is it the role of the church to even try? What about existential crises, such as fossil fuel use and changing climate. We have seen the impact here of drought and horrific fires. I know we have always had drought and bushfires, but the problem is the increased frequency and severity of drought and fire, and other climate related disasters as CO2 in the atmosphere relentlessly rises. Jesus saw the need to act when people were oppressed, so should we act too when catastrophic climate changes are predicted if we carry on as we are?

What can we do? It seems to me that there is a lot of talk but little concerted action. We can preach to the converted, as I am now, or write to politicians who, whether converted or not, persist in putting economic and mining interests above environmental interests. We can vote, but democracy is such that even when close to half the population feel a particular way, a political party can claim a mandate to act against the long term viability of life on this earth. We can write to newspapers, but even if our letters are published, few are swayed.

We are protestants, so we could protest in the streets, and maybe attract some media attention, and provided a protest is peaceful and not disruptive may or may not persuade a few others about the urgency of reducing fossil fuel usage.

In the end probably the most effective thing we can do is to lead by example, and aim to have a lower impact lifestyle ourselves. It is easy, however, to be discouraged and feel that our efforts are just a drop in the ocean – and also to be misled into thinking that our carbon emissions are so insignificant as to not matter. This is what the economists call the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’: at some point a finite public resource gets totally used up, regardless of how small your use is. The problem with fossil fuel is that we all contribute and at some point our/my additional carbon emissions will overload the atmosphere, a public resource. We need to lead by example.

In addition, I find it very disheartening that even with the pandemic and the huge reduction in travel our country’s greenhouse gas emissions are only a few percent down on ‘business as usual’. So as well as our individual efforts, much more needs to be done at a government level to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy.

It is so easy to feel defeated by the lack of real action on climate change, especially here in Australia, and to just give up. What have we to lose? Just the earth, just a future for our children and grandchildren.

Jesus’ action in the Temple, whether motivated by disgust, protest or symbolism, was a response to injustice. He did not just accept the status quo and find ways to rationalise acceptance of what was unacceptable. What tables would he be overturning today?

A few questions to end with:

1. Is there a role for politics in religion or should we limit religion to personal spiritual wellbeing.
2. Can an aspirational target work, eg zero emissions by 2050? (Moon landing by 1970)
3. Do individual actions make any difference? Tragedy of the Commons.