

WEEKLY SERMON

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If you want to grow in your faith, try teaching it to a child

John 2, 13-22

I remember a few years ago trying to explain to a group of young people that, because Jesus was God, by definition he could not sin. 'Ah!' said one cheeky boy. 'But what about when he turned the tables over in the temple? That was a sin!'

It's an interesting question. This incident, recorded in all four Gospels, does indeed seem to portray Jesus in a very bad light. He destroys the stalls of the market traders. He attacks them with whips. He seems to be totally out of control as he bawls and screams at these men who are only trying to make a living for their families. It must have been terrifying!

For a long time people tried to explain away the furious actions of Jesus by claiming that he was 'cleansing' the Temple. This crucial holy place, the argument ran, had been taken over by traders whose profit-generating activity was somehow despoiling the purity of the worship that was offered there.

But later writers have shown this not to be the case. Take for example those dove sellers. Jewish law demanded that the animals offered in sacrifice to atone for sin should be pure and unblemished; pretty difficult if you were going to carry the doves all the way from the far north. The traders selling animals were essential if the sacrifices, which were the heart of temple worship, were to continue.

Or take those money changers. The Law demanded that the Temple tax should be paid in Jewish shekels, not in tainted Roman denarii. That could only be done if there were people in the Temple to change the money over. Without their work, the finances of the Temple would very swiftly collapse.

So, this was not a 'cleansing' at all. It was much more dangerous than that. Jesus was launching a full-scale assault on the Temple and its worship. He was indeed attacking it! So why?

The question is answered by Jesus himself. 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' And later, '...he was speaking of the temple that was his body.' Jesus attacked the Temple because it was no longer needed. God's plan had moved beyond it. There was now a new temple which was the body of Jesus himself.

Just a few days after this attack, Jesus would be nailed to a cross. And in that action, the old sacrificial system would come to an end. Because who needs doves and sheep and cattle when Jesus himself would provide a body for the sacrifice, his own body freely given for us? Jesus is the full and final sacrifice, whose death on the cross puts an end to sin once and for all so that those who trust in its power can know the glorious freedom of eternity.

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So, did Jesus sin when he turned over the tables of the traders as that boy and his friends claimed? No, of course not. Jesus cannot sin, because if he could sin he would not be God.

What looked like sin was in fact dealing with sin. It was a prophetic act, pointing people to the saving power of the cross that is our life and our salvation.

We are now halfway through the journey of Lent, this precious season when our thoughts turn more and more towards Calvary. Lent gives us a chance to do two things.

First, to look to the cross ourselves and to delight in the wonder of the love it reveals. We can do this as we study the scriptures, meditate, pray, and join Christian brothers and sisters in worship.

Second, to point others to the cross. That may sound a hard thing to do, but it doesn't need to be. You could wear a cross around your neck or pin one to the wall in your house. You could tell people about your own belief in the cross or live it out as, through generosity and mercy, you put the self-giving love of the cross into practice. And remember ... as you point people to the cross, you could be saving them for ever.

For only in the cross is forgiveness and life. Jesus, the new temple, has given his own body in sacrifice. And so, we are free.

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