

## **Manningham Uniting Church - Lent 3 Year B Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2024**

**Theme:** What Makes You Angry?

**Texts:** Exodus 20:1–17; John 2:13-22

### **Introduction**

Good morning. This Sunday is the third Sunday in Lent.

Just as the season of Lent helps Christians prepare for Easter, Jews travelled to Jerusalem early to purify themselves for Passover (John 11:55). Christians likewise practice meditation, prayer, and participate in worship throughout Lent. Connecting with the Jews in this way helps us avoid anti-Jewish readings and enables us to reflect on the audacity of Jesus' actions and claims.

John Chapter 2 verses 13 to 22 show us a God through Jesus who cares enough about people to express his anger when he sees how people have weaponised religion for profit.

### **Let us pray...**

I don't know about you but Jesus with a whip in his hand has always been an unsettling image for me. It doesn't seem to fit the image of Jesus that I grew up with. Remember the hymn that begins with these words: "**Gentle Jesus, meek and mild**". That's a hard image to overcome.

And now we're faced with a passage of scripture that begins with Jesus making "a whip of cords." Is anyone else feeling a bit uncomfortable about the whole thing? Just what do we have here? Does Jesus need to attend an anger management workshop? Very popular in the nineties.

By the way, some preachers have tried to justify Jesus' behaviour here by calling it "righteous anger". They have a problem with the image of an angry Jesus. I don't find that helpful –righteous anger. Anger is simply a feeling, nothing righteous or unrighteous.

Now the question I want us to reflect together this morning is: **What Makes You Angry?**

*Now I want you to turn to your neighbour and talk about what makes you angry and when was the last time you were angry?*

Clearly, in John Chapter 2:13 – 22, Jesus was angry! Some might say he was in a rage.

Now here's some more context that should help us better understand what's going on. Jesus, like every Jewish male, had come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to celebrate Passover, following laws listed for Worship found in the book of Deuteronomy (16:16). Jerusalem was at the centre of the religious and political world of Palestine. It was here that the Messiah's return was anticipated to take place.

Jesus observed the Temple, God's house of worship being used to promote dishonest trade on the part of the money changers and merchants. It's also helpful to know, to remember, why the outer court of the Temple was filled with all these money changers and merchants.

Believe it or not, such commerce was necessary. The system allowed only first-rate, unblemished animals to be sacrificed, and people who travelled long distances couldn't bring such an animal with them. So, animals were made available to the travellers at the Temple. The rich could buy a cow or a sheep; poor folks could purchase a dove. There was something for everyone. It was all a matter of convenience.

Much of the same is true with the money changers. Travellers would bring different coins from a variety of places. But only one type of coin was acceptable at the Temple. There was a Temple tax to be paid and the only coinage permitted was Tyrian. Scholars argue about why the Tyrian coin was the one acceptable currency. But there's no argument why Roman coins were unacceptable. Stamped on each Roman coin was a sculpture of the emperor and an inscription declaring him to be divine. So, for practical as well as theological reasons, Jewish travellers had to utilise the services of the moneychangers to pay the Temple tax. Remember it was difficult to get all your luggage, all the kids and your cattle, sheep, and doves, into a First Century minivan.

Now just so we don't get our stories confused, it's good to point out that this story is in all four gospels. In the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), Jesus is said to be angered because the moneychangers and merchants had made his father's house a "den of thieves." But here in the gospel of John, there's no mention of Jesus pointing a finger at the moneychangers and merchants for unsavoury business practices.

Now, what Jesus is angry about is the system that has turned His Father's house into an "emporium." That's the Greek word for "marketplace". Jesus is angry because the Temple has been turned into a mall. It's become all about convenience. It's become all about maximising profits. It's become all about transactions. Anything you want — you could get there.

The whole practice of worship and sacrifice had become more about providing all the amenities necessary to complete one's dutiful obligation with ease and comfort.

So what does Jesus do? He makes a whip of cords, he drives all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

I'm still uncomfortable with the image, but I have found solace in discovering what's happening here. Jesus did not fashion a "cat-of-nine-tails." Do you know what's a "cat-of-nine-tails"? It's constructed of nine knotted cords or thongs of rawhide attached to a handle. The "whip" he made was not made from leather. Nor was it used to inflict punishment and pain. The Greek word "cords" refers to "rushes and reeds" Jesus would have found on the ground.

By twisting them together Jesus made a device to shoo the animals out.

Notice, and this is important, Jesus didn't use it on people, neither did he hurt the animals. That changes the image, doesn't it? Jesus shoos cattle and sheep with a contraption made of rushes and reeds. He "cleanses" the temple by drawing attention to what was going on. Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers as a way of saying, "This is not to be your focus!" "This is not how you should conduct yourself!"

Jesus sees the actions of the money changers and merchants as making a mockery of God, which brews a wave of anger within Him. Why on earth would

Jesus stop purification — and why in such a dramatic way? Again, what makes Jesus so angry?

Again, we see in verse 16, Jesus calls the temple an “emporium,” or a marketplace. Rather than a scene of spiritual preparation, Jesus instead sees a place focused on monetary exchange.

Like Old Testament prophets, he challenged the temple economy, questioning whether it was focused more on wealth than prayer. Jesus was angry.

A reasonable speculation is that his anger was related to the complicity of Roman bureaucracy and temple authorities. However, Jesus’ actions in the temple are what finally got him killed. After this, religious leaders are dead set against him.

God’s beloved, whenever religion gets into the business of the “buying and selling” of God, or of requiring sacrifices to earn God’s love, we have a problem.

When Jesus said, “Get these birds out of here,” it was a clue to the source of Jesus’ anger. The ordinary people had to sacrifice to be right with the priesthood and the temple. They sacrificed oxen and sheep, but the very poor were allowed to offer doves.

Remember, Mary and Joseph had to give doves when they brought the infant Jesus to the temple (Luke 2:22–24). Jesus knows that his religion is not taking care of the poor; in fact, it’s stealing from the poor, and making them give even the little they have to feel they are right with God.

Jesus is angry about this, and unfortunately, many use this passage to justify violence because Jesus appears pretty violent here. But note that he’s violent toward *things*, not toward people. He’s liberating animals and trying to liberate the poor from their oppression.

Of course, the religious leaders want to protect the building, the temple, but Jesus is redefining the temple. In John 2:21, Jesus identifies his body as the temple. The new temple is the human person, we are the body of Christ.

During the weeks of Lent Christians consider what it means to follow Jesus, or to walk the way of the cross.

The gospel portrays Jesus in a public act that confronts religious and government institutions. Rome holds the ultimate power. This observation is important because it is implicit and because Christian listeners tend to miss it. The traditional heading for this pericope, “Jesus Cleanses the Temple,” contributes to the perception that the problem which evokes Jesus’ anger is the corruption of Jewish rituals and Jewish leaders.

**On the third Sunday of Lent**, as we hear this story of Jesus disrupting the dehumanizing systems that have grown up in the Temple – I want us to learn “*The Blessing of Anger*” from that Franciscan blessing –  
“*May God bless us with anger at injustice, violence, and the exploitation of people, so that we might work for justice, freedom and peace.*”

Back to the question I began with, ‘**What makes you angry?**’ As I have said, there is nothing righteous or unrighteous about anger? It’s what we do with our anger!

Like other emotions, there are ways to express anger that can be healthy, and there are ways to express anger that are deeply harmful – and that can include violence.

And we know what that looks like – anger expressed as violence and harm – in the threat of a bully, within our closest relationships, or within systems of oppression that are designed to perpetuate our harm and the harm of others.

So let me say this: There is no “*blessing*” in anger that causes harm. I am convinced that God *never ever* desires our harm. No, no, no. God *never ever* desires our harm. God, in Jesus Christ, stands **against** everything that does us harm – against violence, injustice, exploitation, oppression.

**On this third Sunday of Lent**, I want to invite us to consider this one vital aspect of anger. I want to invite us to think of *anger as a stance* – as a sense that wells up in us, as a stance against those things in the world that cause harm – harm to the vulnerable, to the marginalised, to any creature, to the Earth – anger as a stance that wells up in us against harm, and that then says, “No. Enough. Stop.”

In this morning's gospel, we see Jesus' anger in the stance that he takes in the Temple. Different from the other three gospels, the Gospel of John places this scene right at the start of Jesus' ministry – it is a significant event.

When he comes to the Temple – what he sees is the economic apparatus of the Temple making money off the poor. And Jesus says, No. Enough. Stop. “Stop making my father's house a marketplace!” And Jesus seeks to dismantle the system that exploits the vulnerable, the poor.

God's beloved, hear this: The poor need everyone to have anger at the systems and structures that keep the poor poor.

The indigenous peoples of Australia – need everyone to have anger – at the systems of racism that have taken root in this country from the very beginning and that thrive into this day – they need everyone to be angry at injustice – and they need us to call ourselves to account – so that we might see, and change, and dismantle the racist apparatus that drives this nation on the backs of the oppressed.

God's beloved, the Earth. The Earth needs everyone to have anger – at the damage we have done – so that we will see and dismantle our destructive patterns of living – and try, as we teeter on the verge of climate collapse, to repair and to re-birth sustainable ways of living.

Biblical scholar Nyasha Junior reads this Scripture and asks us this question: *“What are the current conditions in our lives, and our congregations, and our community, and our nation that we should find unacceptable?”*

Because they harm people, and oppress people, and exploit people? Where do we need to say, “No. Enough. Stop.”? And what then will we do?

*“May God bless us with anger at injustice, violence, and the exploitation of people, so that we might work for justice, freedom, and peace.”* God's beloved, the blessing of anger is specific – it is anger **at** injustice and violence, and the exploitation of people.

And you may have noticed that each of these blessings comes with a “so that.”

These blessings have a purpose – a specific way that God invites and empowers us to infuse the world with good.

**On the Third Sunday of Lent**, may God bless us with anger *so that* we might live for justice, freedom, and peace.

We have to be blessed with anger at everything that does us and the world harm, *so that* we can clear our way to justice and love and life. This blessing and this Scripture, they are, ultimately, about Resurrection.

As Jesus takes a stance in the Temple against its systems of exploitation, as he journeys toward the cross, as he takes us with him on into Resurrection, Jesus says, with his whole body, these systems – these powers that have harmed you and held you down and held you back – they no longer have power – these powers are dead.

In the power of Resurrection, everything that lies before you is life.

May God bless us with discomfort, at easy answers half-truths and superficial relationships, so that we might live deeply and from the heart.

AND May God bless us with anger, at injustice, violence, and the exploitation of people, so that we might work for justice, freedom, and peace.

AND In blessing us with discomfort and anger, *may God continue to bless the world with life.*