

Lent III

Exodus 20 : 1-17
I Corinthians I : 18-25
John 2 : 13-22

The cleansing of the temple is a story, depending on your personality and theology, that is thrilling, disturbing, or confusing – or all of the above. It is an image of Jesus which does not fit with meek or mild or even overtly healing. This is full bodied, conviction driven, turning the world upside down behaviour.

We hear the Gospel this week in the context of the Ten Commandments and the season of Lent.

There is a real sense that the religious of Jesus' day, and ours too, were being judged and found severely wanting in the light of the ten commandments and the spirit of the law.

Quite literally, religious business as usual is found to be failing.

God indeed loves creation. God indeed has a preference for the poor – for the widow and the orphan and the alien or refugee – and if physical earthly Jesus turned up today there would be some serious over turning of the tables in political circles, in religious places, and in our kitchens and lounge rooms.

No wonder Jesus was a serious irritation to the religious authorities and hearing the story at Lent in the build up to the Passion we can understand why Jesus was arrested and tried by the religious system and executed by the political system. He was a threat to both the religious and political systems of his day.

I think more is happening - although that would have been enough.

I think the passion of Jesus is also wanting to shock us, invite us into a deeper truer more sacred way of life. Into a life and relationship beyond religious practice beyond “good enough” religion. After all the money lenders etc were operating an arguably legitimate business.

I believe that we are being asked to go beyond business as usual.

A real danger for all of us especially those of us very busy with the work of being church is that the holy work of being the church can become business as usual. Completely understandable from a human perspective but potentially dangerous from a spiritual perspective.

Doing the business of church can keep us distracted from the soul vocation of being in communion with the divine and with other seekers, other followers. In other words, keeping us distracted from being the church.

There is a balance to be lived - of course - though the busier we become more tricky a balance also becomes.

One of the ways to hold that tension I believe is to obey the commandment to keep the Sabbath which almost none of us do anymore.

Keeping the Sabbath is probably much more radical in our time than in any time before.

We so value busyness – work for money and all it can purchase, work for charity, keeping our homes beautiful and tasteful, keeping fit, keeping up to date with current affairs, keeping up with family and friends by every social medium we can learn to master, and on and on – including the busyness of being church.

We need, although do not like, Jesus to come into our lives and overturn a few tables.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favourite authors, puts it:

”At least one day in every seven, pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home not because you are sick but because you are well.

Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than what you can produce – that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight – and when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so, remember that your own conviction is not required.

The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.

It is hard to understand why so many people put “Thou shalt not do any work” in a different category from “Thou shalt not kill” or “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” especially since those teachings are all on the same list.

The ancient wisdom of the Sabbath commandment – and of the Christian gospel as well – is that there is no saying yes to God without saying no to God’s rivals.

No, I will not earn my way today.

No, I will not make anyone else work either.

No, I will not worry about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink, or about my body what I will wear.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

And there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, “A Geography of Faith: An Altar in the World”)

What do we need to say “no” to in order to say a more whole hearted yes to God? And if the answer is not already clear then try a day without phone, email, snail mail, or any kind of working. Try a day of resting, sitting so quietly that you can hear the movement of what might be the spirit or the breath of God. Allow ancient memories of forgotten moments and people to emerge and be honoured with tears, or smiles and commend them to God.

Listen out for what songs might emerge, any soundtrack that is in your heart. What line from a psalm suggests itself?

Don’t wait until you are sick and tired before you spend time doing nothing in particular with God. Make a Sabbath date with God and keep it.

And then when you are called upon to take action it shall more likely be the right action because it will come from your communion with God.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians which we heard this morning

You are God's love-letters written not with ink
but with the love called the Holy Spirit;
not on tablets of stone but across the pages of your human heart.

That is where God's invitation is to be found. The divine craziness is that God's language of love is you and me. Believing that the God of the universe cares about every unique individual is the ultimate leap of faith.

And that is the story of the season of Lent.

It was Jesus' humanity, not his divinity, which was most evident during his last few weeks on this earth.

He stomped about. He spoke out. He raged about the Temple, the holy place of God, and insisted it could be better, demanded it to be better.

He annoyed the ruling powers, and he knew that what he was doing was life-threatening and it was.

May this Lenten season you learn to trust the Spirit, to trust the Story, and to live the craziness of the Gospel that turns this world upside down, right-side up.

Don't be a normal Christian.

Don't be a nominal Christian.

Be a Christian ... who crazily is a love letter of God's.

Wendy