

When Jesus Takes Offence

Message

Jesus is angered by our trivialising of religion that inoculates us against the claims of a holy God, and calls us to clean out the crassness and commercialism and approach God on God's terms.

Sermon

Well, so much for that old song we used to sing in Sunday School - "gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child" – according to today's Gospel reading, nothing could be further from the truth!

This story of Jesus losing his cool in the temple appears in all of the four gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it comes right near the end of the gospel, the week before Jesus is crucified, in its correct chronological order. But the account in John's gospel has a twist to it, and for John this story must have had some special significance, because he puts it right at the start of his book, in chapter 2. It's one of the first pictures or images of Jesus that John gives us. No, he doesn't begin with an image of "gentle Jesus meek and mild" or "here's Mr Nice Guy", but he presents an image of Jesus as a tough guy with a tough message. And all this happens before Jesus has run into trouble with the authorities, it happens while he is still popular with the people, and it's while he's riding high in the opinion polls that he flies into a screaming rage, and trashes the forecourt of the Jerusalem temple.

So what could it possibly be that caused him to snap? What made him do this terribly unpopular thing? And what exactly was it that he was attacking? It seems odd that at this stage of his career when Mr Popularity had not run foul of anyone, and his ratings in the opinion polls were at an all-time high, so why did he risk his reputation? Rather like a politician increasing taxes on the eve of an election, it seems a bit odd. If he'd come in raging about the ten commandments, we might have coped. If he'd attacked the thieves for their stealing, the adulterers or the murderers we could understand it. Even attacking the Pharisees for their legalism, the Sadducees for their snobbishness, the soldiers for their violence we could justify. But on this particular occasion he didn't mention any of those things.

In last week's readings we heard of Jesus asking His disciples "who do people think I am", then goes on to tell them that the Son of Man must die to fulfil the prophecies. In other words He knew that the end was coming, so maybe this might be his last opportunity to let fly about something that had been bothering him for some time.

You see, I believe that what he was attacking was not the temple and its business practices, but the actual worshippers themselves for their method of worship. I believe He was denouncing the religious for their religion. Not an attack on thieves and rogues, but an attack directed fairly and squarely at the righteous in the church.

The temple was a very important place, a place where people went to worship, a place to meet with God. And this wasn't at any old time of the year. A time carefully chosen to take place right in the middle of the celebration of the Passover, the busiest time in the temple. The Passover is that time of the year when the Jews celebrate God helping the Children of Israel escape slavery in Egypt. In particular It celebrates the tenth and worst of the plagues whilst they were in in captivity, the slaughter of the first-born. The Israelites had been instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spring lamb and, upon seeing this, the spirit of the Lord *passed over* these homes, hence the term "Passover". And to this day it remains the most widely observed of all the Jewish holidays. Peak period in the temple.

Yes, Jesus picked prime time to go nuts – a certain attention grabber. Rather like walking into the middle of a Moomba Parade here in Melbourne, going bananas, absolutely sure that the TV cameras are on you, and you will make headlines on the 6 o'clock news. I can just see Siotame now

Back to the temple - the people were turning up in droves to celebrate and meet with God, to praise and thank Him for delivering them from slavery. And like us they were turning to their priests, their pastors and their preachers to help them meet with God. That's the job of priests and pastors - to help people meet with God.

So what was wrong with all of this? People doing their job, providing a much needed service for the worshippers. You couldn't put Roman coins in the temple offering box, it had to be Jerusalem shekels, so if you were from part of the country which only dealt in Roman coins, you would need the services of a money changer. If you wanted to offer God an unblemished lamb or bullock or pigeon, as the scripture required, you could buy one on site instead of having

bring your own on a long journey. And so the livestock dealers set up a trading table. It all makes sense. Sure, they may have charged a little extra, but they did have costs and overheads which had to be met. A “service fee” – just like the banks charge us service fees.

No, I don't believe that that it was the horse trading and possibly some shady deals that angered Jesus. I believe what really got under his skin was the extent to which worship had become so trivial, mechanical and mercenary, rather than simple contact with our maker. It had become vending machine worship – put your money in here and get a little spirituality out there. A spiritual ATM. Worship as just another item on a shopping list between getting the car serviced and booking in for a relaxation class.

When Jesus says (in one translation) “you have made it a den of thieves”, I don't think he meant thieves as such, and theft as in stealing money from the people's pockets, but rather as stealing the people's spirituality as they came to worship.

And “the tables”? Was he really worried about the physical tables or the deals being done around the tables? No, I don't believe He was attacking the tables as such but “the table” – “the table” of what the temple had to offer.

In recent years we have seen main stream churches lose significant ground as spiritual providers in the community. When I was young churches were bulging with people, morning, noon and night, dare I say offering something a little more ‘entertaining’ than just sitting around on a Sunday, at a time when every public venue and activity was closed. Then along comes television, the early days TV transmission didn't start until late afternoon, and almost immediately evening church attendance diminished to almost nothing – why? – because television had better entertainment to offer on its “table”.

And so what IS on our table? If Jesus were to walk in here right now, would He have cause to overturn our tables? Would He go nuts right here, knock the pulpit over, throw the collection plates over the floor, toss the overhead projector out the window? Living in a world of what seems to be one of increasing injustice, violence, war, poverty, drug and alcohol problems, do we have sufficient spiritual solutions on our table? Or has the church just become a service centre? A place where we dispense spiritual medication and just hope that the patient goes away and gets better. Well, looking around here I don't think that this particular church falls into that category. But what about the wider church?

So much for the “tables” of the world and the church. At a personal level what is on our own tables? What deals are we doing on our tables, under our tables, on the tables out in the back room? When we feel irritable and discontent, is it possibly Jesus giving our tables a nudge? Remember that gentle Jesus is not always meek and mild.

We all have spiritual needs, a need to connect with God and to connect with ourselves, a need to find meaning in life and live accordingly. And Christianity has a table full of responses that will meet those needs, just as long as we don't treat them like items on the shelf of a spiritual supermarket, selected as we need them for any given occasion, have them scanned at the checkout and go on our way with our hunger for God only barely satisfied.

If you're looking for a nice, acceptable feel-good religion, don't come looking to Jesus. Walk into any bookshop and you will find the shelves full of self-help, self-realisation and touch-base-with-your-spirituality books. Have you ever noticed that of all the thousands of self-help books ever written, not one of them has ever survived more than a few years? Funny how there are always a constant crop of new “sure fire”, “this is the definitive solution” self-help books. They never survive – except for one – that's if you like to call the Bible a self-help book.

And fortunately there is one table Jesus would never need to overturn – that is God's own true and honest table. And if you are prepared to hand yourself over, body and soul, to this table, then you are welcome to approach. **NO OTHER CONDITIONS APPLY.** No cash, no credit cards or gift vouchers required.

This is no ordinary table but a table which is to be approached with reverence and awe, not with a mere nod of familiarity. If you're ready to approach the table of the God as you may understand him/her/it, then the table is set.

May your table **NOT** be one that Jesus would want to overturn.