

# The Temple Which Must Be Replaced

a sermon preached on the  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent**

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by Fr David Moore  
parish priest

Lection: John 2: 13-22

Two interpretive distractions have long prevented me from seeing what now strikes me as the heart of today's gospel story. On the one hand there's the widespread use of this story to explain that Jesus was capable of becoming angry – indeed, this story is used as a 'proof-text' to justify Christian anger, on the basis of Jesus' example. On the other hand, there's the widespread preoccupation with the meeting point of religion and business.

Christians have historically pilloried Jews for being traders, and used this story to support a wider anti-Semitism. This is patently hypocritical, since it is perfectly obvious that Christians have been just as enthusiastic about turning over the cash registers as anyone else, in spite of our Lord's very numerous and explicit warnings about riches, camels and needles coming particularly memorably to mind. One would be hard pressed to find a church anywhere, I suspect, which had not conducted garage sales, fetes, and stalls in and around the church and grounds.

As for looking for justifications for anger, the fact is that reliance on a single text to prove something we feel the need to justify in ourselves is a blatantly manipulative use of the text. Furthermore, there are many occasions when Jesus feels or displays anger, though admittedly English translations frequently disguise this fact with rather bland sentimentalisms, such as 'he had pity' for them.

In any case, both these fascinations, with anger and with cash registers, are superficial dead-ends, I have come to realise. Not only because they manipulate the text.

But also because like all fascination, like titillation and mass entertainment, they are a way of allowing ourselves to be distracted by trivialities, rather than face the deeper and more confronting meaning of Scripture, and thus the deeper meaning of all things. The deeper and more confronting background to the gospel is the reality of Jesus' struggle with the demonic – admittedly much more explicit in Mark than in John, to whom the Lectionary directs us on this third Lenten Sunday.

This struggle against the demonic is explicitly set before the Gospel hearer from the beginning to end, from the wilderness temptations, through countless healing miracles, to Gethsemane, to the High Priest's house, and finally to the cross. The temple will be destroyed because it, too, in spite of its original intent, has come to manifest the demonic.

"It is the very division of the house of God into an inner section for the "holy" (Israel) and an outer for the "unholy" (Gentiles) that frustrates the divine purpose. Elsewhere in the gospel we have seen Jesus' overcoming of the "holy/unholy" barrier running in parallel with his exorcistic activity, suggesting that the very division has in it something of the demonic."<sup>1</sup>

That's the shocking good news! What Jesus is casting out, from individuals and from the whole religious

<sup>1</sup>

Byrne B, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008, p180.

culture, is the demonic of separation – separation between Jew and Gentile, between clean and unclean, insider and outsider, rich and poor, ultimately between flesh and Spirit, heaven and earth. It is these separations which we endlessly manufacture which are, in truth, demonic, and from which all other malaise proceeds.

Thus, the casting out of demons manifest in sickness of one kind or another simply prefigures the ultimate and more cosmic showdown, for which the temple stands as a symbol - as physical structure, as physical body, as soul. This temple *must* be destroyed because it has come to concretise and validate separation, and is therefore the ultimate manifestation of the demonic. This temple's destruction makes possible evolution towards the new temple not made with hands, the temple of the Body of the Son of Humanity which is manifest in every person by the advocacy of the Spirit.

Wherever and whenever religious people and structures and theologies enshrine separation, dividedness, dualism - driving a wedge between heaven and earth, flesh and Spirit, clean and unclean, insider and outsider, black and white, gay and straight, despised and 'popular' – such temples are contrary to the Divine purpose being worked out in Christ, and will be destroyed in order that the new temple may be constructed. That is the good news of Jesus Christ.

What is the temple, the Lent experience invites us to consider, which must be replaced in us, and between us?

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)