

March 8, 2015 Exodus 20: 1-17 (childrens time), 1 Cor 1:18-25, Jn 2:13-22

Jesus Loses his Cool

One of the real joys of the Baltic Cruise our family took last summer to celebrate my mother's 90th birthday were the day trips to various world heritage sites which included many beautiful cathedrals and churches. I recall seeing the Cathedral in Lubeck Germany which was started in 1173 by Henry the Lion. It is a massive cathedral that took 57 years to complete by 1230 and then was changed into a Gothic structure over the next 105 years, keeping another few generations busy. It was hard not to be impressed by the grandeur, beauty and just the incredible effort that generations of people put into creating this testament to God.

Now having seen many churches and other historic sites, I cannot recall if it was here or another church that recreated for the tourists the engineering skill and hard labour that was involved in creating such structures for it was truly amazing. One also could not help but question whether this was really the best use of the energy and resources of the people of those centuries past who would

have found life hard and a struggle. Whose glory was this really honouring? Even though the Lubeck Cathedral was partly destroyed on Palm Sunday in 1942 during World War 11 raid, the Lutherans of the last century found enough meaning in their temple to rebuild the damaged structure so that a congregation still worships there today, focusing primarily on making it a house for music for the town.

Every generation seems to want to express or maybe capture the glory of God in a temple of some sort as if God's Spirit can be more present in one area than another. Very early on in John's gospel, he tells this story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to visit the temple just as people are gathering for the Passover Festivals. The second temple is still a work in progress having been under construction for 46 years during the reign of Herod. It was still an important place for the Jews where worship and sacrifices could be made to God.

It is here in this setting that Jesus does something extremely radical and challenging to demonstrate the passion and purpose of his mission. His ministry begins with conflict. We know it is a significant incident because all four gospel writers include this story in their gospels,

however only John places this event near the beginning of his gospel, right after Jesus has given his first sign by turning water into wine.

If you imagine the scene, you can understand why Jesus got himself into some serious trouble. It was Passover, so Jews from all over the world were coming to the Temple in Jerusalem which was God's permanent dwelling place, a sign of the covenantal promise of God's eternal presence, the centre of the cosmic fire. Money changers were there to help them change their currency, so they could fulfill the requirements of the Law in the Temple. The priests who fulfilled the sacrificial rites were descended from priestly lineage. A system was in place which had gone unquestioned.

The outer court which it is said would be the size of two football fields was filled with cattle, sheep and doves so that the pilgrims did not have to bring their own animals and birds for the offerings before the High Priests. Because of the crowds, the place was crawling with extra security, Roman guards looking to suppress any hint of violence. If it were today, their Tasers and guns would be readied.

Yet it is here that Jesus' passionate anger erupts as he makes a whip of cords, driving all of them out of the temple, sheep and cattle, fur flying everywhere, dumping out coins and overturning tables. This is so not like the meek and mild Jesus that we often carry around in our mind and heart, an image that can make us feel guilty when we lose our own tempers, like we are somehow being 'unchristian'. Yet we all should know that there are times when anger is an appropriate response to a situation.

So why did Jesus lose his cool? Why was he so angry? What were his intentions? John Dominic Crossan, a well-respected theologian and historian, emphasizes that Jesus was not against the Temple as such, and not against the high priesthood as such. To think in this way has led to some of the world's worst anti-Semitic thought. Crossan believes it was a protest from the legal and prophetic heart of Judaism against Jewish cooperation with Roman imperial control. When religion colludes with the power of Empire and bows to its values, rather than the values of God's Kingdom, no matter what generation we are a part of, then we may indeed empathize with anger of the prophets.

The temple priests evoked resentment because of their inherited status, their connection to Roman authorities, and their distance from those who suffered under imperial powers. The temple priests were not in any sense religious leaders of the people. The Roman officials appointed the chief priest and he served their interests. Roman coffers benefited from the marketplace that supported sacrificial rites. A disruption at the market place at one of the temple courts during a festival season like Passover affected Rome's revenues.

Jesus saw this as a real injustice, a perversion of what the ethical, economic and spiritual life that Jews were called to live as people made to live in covenant with a God who called for just relationships— and it made him angry!

So what are the things, the issues that make you angry, that make you want to write a letter, or send a tweet, or write an essay, or join a march, or write a poem or cause you to lament in the privacy of your room? Is it the anger that comes with grieving, of love that is lost or betrayed or disappointing? Is it the anger when we hear of the abuse of children and teens, the assaults on young women at our college and university campuses? When the elderly or the

homeless or those most vulnerable take the fall for cutting taxes for the rich because they are too frail, or tired or sick to speak out and organize. When we hear of the latest atrocity committed by ISIS or other terrorist organizations? Or the radicalizing of youth into a religion and politics that leads them into fear, death and destruction of others, their families and themselves.... There is anger when we ourselves feel we have been victimized in some way.

Surely today's scripture indicates that as followers of Jesus, there are times when anger is justified and needs to be expressed and the energy from the anger can have the power to change the world, society, including ourselves.

In John's gospel, the disciples of Jesus are trying to make sense of this display of anger that got Jesus into so much trouble, even death on a cross. The followers of Christ in the years after the Temple had been destroyed, in the years after his resurrection, also wondered what this overturning of the tables meant. They remembered how it was said of him "Zeal for your house will consume me" taken from psalm 69, a psalm which expresses the anger of someone being bullied for having a passionate faith in God, not an uncommon experience yet today.

The Jewish priests and the disciples no doubt wondered by what authority he showed such a display of power and anger. Where did his zeal come from? What did he mean when he said that he would raise up the temple in three days if it were to be destroyed? Taken literally, it would be like someone saying they could rebuild the Twin Towers after 9/11 in a few days, single-handedly, when indeed it took over a year just to take the rubble away! How should they take Jesus seriously at all and not just consider him some kind of madman, some kind of fool or delinquent.

To grasp the mysterious inner meanings of John's gospel we have to read it almost backwards, the way we might read some magazines or books. We need to read this book from the perspective of the resurrection, how Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross and in three days was raised to life again by the Spirit of the living God.

Jesus was not speaking of the grandiose physical temple in which he stood and drove out the market vendors, but he was now speaking of his own body as the temple of God, as the place where God's presence could be found. He was speaking of the incarnation. He was revealing that the wisdom and power of God's Spirit was found in the human

body, in the human heart, in just and right relationships between human beings. I can't help but think of how Paul develops this same idea that our own bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, the place where the risen Christ may dwell.

We also find some foundational ideas for atonement theology here as Jesus shifts the focus of where the covenant with God is renewed - no more sacrifices would be needed to come into relationship with God because He would provide the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices, that his death would be enough to secure our covenant with God. His resurrection confirms this. God intends to share this power and energy of love and abundant life directly with human beings, animals and with all of creation. This reality of abundant eternal life which is given for all people is the message that Jesus Christ mediates to all who want live out and embody God's compassion for self and others.

Yes, Jesus lost his cool. He got very angry, but it was because he cared. He knew that life with God needed to be shared if there was to be salvation for the world. So as seekers and believers of Jesus' message of love and life, go and be passionate in the mission God has called you to do – and from time to time, it is okay to lose your cool!

