

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 15 MARCH 2009

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John 2: 13-22

"Controversy in the Temple – Jesus Uncut!"

In our story, we find Jesus uncut!

During the Passover, he enters Jerusalem. There would have been a hundred thousand pilgrims at this time from many parts of the ancient world. He enters the Temple's outer Court of the Gentiles, an area the size of two large football fields. He gets extreme! He makes a whip, as weapons were disallowed and Temple guards policed the crowd, and he drives out the merchants who were selling sacrificial animals and the money traders.

Why such anger? Why engage in such extreme acts? Why, when Temple trading was a normal and necessary commercial activity, assisting pilgrims and regulars to engage in worship?

Debate exists about the meaning of this event in the Gospels. There are two different accounts, John's and the Synoptic Gospels. There are similarities and differences. Raymond E Brown (*The Gospel of John*, vol 29, pp114ff) concludes that 'the accounts draw on a common source which has been adapted and expanded with additional information in each tradition'. (119)

Jesus was not a reactionary, so this controversial act, which must have been a small symbolic event, was based on clear and strong grounds. Let me suggest what I think they were.

1. *"Corruptio optima pessima"*: Corruption of the best is worst!

In the drama *The West Wing*, Leo McGarry, White House Chief of Staff sits and weeps in a dimly lit room of the White House. He never weeps. Why now? He has just discovered that his life-long friend Ken O'Neal who had risked his life to save him when they were soldiers in Vietnam had paid bribes to defence contractors to secure military contracts. A few days ago Leo had presented him with a Humanitarian of the Year award. The President enters the room and Leo shares his unprecedented feelings. With muted anger, he says that men had died for them in the rescue in Vietnam, and that they had a "responsibility to live lives with integrity and honesty to honour their sacrifice". The President quietly says to Leo: *"Corruptio optima pessima"*, corruption of the best is the worst." (Season 5, Episode 13)

My first point is that Jesus was making a similar case. Jesus, I suggest, was making a clear though indirect accusation that the religious and political leaders were corrupt; that those who held national leadership positions, who ought as the "best" govern justly, these leaders abuse their position and power.

It is historically known that the ruling priestly class dominated the commercial enterprises in the temple market to their own advantage. Other rabbis were also concerned about the fairness of temple-oriented commerce (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 300).

Certainly, Jesus is challenging the temple institutions and the leadership because of the way they exploit the poor, as Ched Myers suggests. But corrupt leadership by the leaders of a nation, as Leo

points out in *The West Wing*, does more than exploit the poor. It also damages and exploits all citizens who entrust leaders to run the country for the benefit of all people. Citizens identify with the nation and its leaders, develop a collective identity as well as a sense of security and belonging. Corruption unsettles this relationship and produces instability within the nation. It also sets up a climate of fear and anxiety that reduces the ability of society to seek to challenge such abuse of power.

These particular Jewish leaders realise how radical Jesus' critique is, because this becomes one of the key reason why they plot to kill him. Jesus placed himself alongside prophets like Jeremiah with such attacks on the corrupt leaders.

2. Secondly, Jesus also challenged powerful merchants and bankers and their representatives, the street level sellers of sacrificial animals and the money changers, because of their corrupt practices. Again, there is historical evidence of the oppressive practices of both merchants and financial institutions, particularly price fixing. He sends a clear prophetic challenge to such practice by driving out the sellers.

It is known that business and government colluded to further their own interests. In AD 30, the high priest Caiaphas avenged himself on one group of merchants by allowing "rival merchants to set up animal stalls in the temple confines". (Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 119) Jesus must have been aware of this collusion between business and government.

3. Thirdly, I suggest that the righteous anger expressed in this act had grown as he saw and experienced the results of this oppression in the people he met, listened to, healed and taught.

This was my own experience when I worked and associated with Indigenous people. This privilege began in 1996 when I was the Director of the Institute for Mission of the Uniting Church, an Assembly and NSW UCA Synod position. One of my five key areas was to work with Indigenous leaders to create theological and leadership training. Four times a year we held three-week, live-in teaching events, which were attended by whole families from all over NSW. I worked hard to create a climate of trust and truth-telling. When they learnt to trust me, the elders told story after story to each other, particularly to their young people, about how they suffered in years before the 1970s. I sat and listening found myself overwhelmed with grief, great sadness and mounting anger at their unjust and humiliating treatment. At first, I would go home at night and just weep quietly. I remember taking an Indigenous family to a Uniting Church that had invited them to share their story. They shared their hopes about a site where a massacre happened, and how they wished to commemorate this event on a yearly basis. One white Uniting Church member, with an irritated voice, asked why they needed to dwell on such things. I was furious. I turned to her and said, "and why do we remember ANZAC Day every year?"

Doves were the only commodities that women, lepers and those categorised as unclean could afford to buy and use to sacrifice for their purification. Again, there was evidence of high prices by dove sellers, which not only placed an unfair financial burden on these people but also prohibited them from buying and offering sacrifices and thus excluding them from being reintegrated as adequate members of mainstream society.

4. Finally, I suggest that Jesus' act of overturning the tables and driving out the sellers is a symbolic act which calls for an end to worship that exploits people, that takes economic or political advantage of them, and that treats them as second-class citizens.

Even more, John recognises that in the resurrection of Jesus, all people can have equal access to this

kind of God. The Risen Christ is no longer just the historical Jesus because in faith we know this Christ is also the Logos, the co-Creator with God within creation from the beginning and end of time. This means human beings have access to the creative, providential forgiving and loving Being we call God. But we need the historical Jesus because stories like this give us historical signs and symbols of God as the mystery of the world.

Worship is a sacred space where human beings can encounter the fullness of their being and the being-full-ness of the mystery of life. In addition, this involves safe engagement with our human failings, traumas and our incomprehensible beauty and worth-while-ness.

Conclusion

CJ Cregg, The Press Secretary, in the drama *The West Wing*, slowly walks into the West Wing late in the evening. She looks diminished. She is traumatised. She has just owned her only indiscretion, her one-night stand with the Vice President ten years ago, who was at that time a married man. Toby Ziegler, the Communications Director, sits silently and reverently and listens to this anguished confession. "There is no night in my life that I regret more than that one", she gasps. "I wish I could, but I can't explain it. ... I knew he was married... I always thought that women who do that..." She cannot say it, but we the viewers have known her over many episodes as a consistent, strong, single woman, faithful to justice for women and men, working families, the poor, her family. "I am sorry", she says to Toby, almost weeping. "You don't have to apologise to me", he responds quietly. "I have no one else to apologise to", she replies. (Season 5, Episode 14) Surely, God meets CJ in this moment, as God meets us all in these moments, wherever we are.

Each place of worship is challenged to create such a safe, sacred space. A space where human life can be remade; where we can meet brokenness and celebrate our beauty.

Jesus died to stand up for such possibilities.