

# Jubilee Sunday Sermon Notes

3rd Sunday in Lent - Year B

Exodus 20.1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1.18-25

John 2.13-22

Midway through the season of Lent, the lectionary texts often seem to have little relation to one another. However, seen from the perspective of issues related to the Jubilee and global economic justice, both the Hebrew scripture and the Gospel are related in their messages about idolatry and liberation, and it will be on those two passages that we will concentrate.

## John 2.13-22

Though “cleansing of the temple” is the common title for this passage, that is not really what is going on here. “Cleansing” implies something has been cleaned up or changed or reformed. But, in John’s version of the story (and probably in the Synoptics), Jesus doesn’t appear interested in cleaning up the market system that operated at the Temple, but in doing away with its idolatrous economic infrastructure altogether.<sup>1</sup>

The story occurs when Jesus enters Jerusalem for the first time. It is evocative to note that his first (and probably last) visit to the city was to celebrate the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. As we noted earlier, the “spinal cord” for ethical behavior for Hebrews was that God liberated them from slavery, and now their task was to do the same for others. This was the basis for the Sabbath and Jubilee legislation: God freed us, so we must now free others. So, hundreds of years later, Jews from all over Israel were required to return to Jerusalem on the festival known as “Passover” to be reminded of that covenant promise.

In Jesus’ case, he made his trip to Jerusalem after an extensive ministry in Galilee, preaching a spiritual and economic egalitarianism. He appears to have entered Jerusalem expecting (or at least *wanting*) to see a celebration of the Exodus liberation acts of God and saw instead a corrupted system that maintained the economic caste system. According to all four canonical gospel accounts, he enters the temple, sees the activities being performed there, and is enraged.<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan says that Jesus’ message of radical equality and liberation “exploded in indignation at the temple as the seat and symbol of all that was non-egalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and political level.”<sup>3</sup>

But what exactly did he find that enraged him so? According to John, Jesus found two things: those who were “selling” (cattle, sheep, and doves for the offerings) and those who were “changing” (money from international currency to local

currency). Both were corrupt, and both were central to the economic idolatry that sustained the nation as a whole.

**The sellers (*tous p•lountas*)** were those who sold animals for the offerings made at the temple (sorry, but that was the tradition; they would probably think that iPods and high heels were immoral too). People were required to make sacrifices for a variety of festivals and rites. If you were wealthy you gave a large animal, like a cow or ox. If you were poor you gave doves or pigeons.<sup>4</sup> However, to ensure “unblemished” animals, you were required to purchase your animals at the gate of the temple where the prices were higher than the country-side. And, as with any regressive tax or price system, the costs tended to be felt more by the poor than the wealthy. To purchase one pair of doves at the temple was the equivalent of two days’ wages. But the doves had to be inspected for quality control just *inside* the temple, and if your recently purchased unblemished animals were found to be in fact blemished, then you had to buy two more doves for the equivalent of 40 days’ wages!<sup>5</sup>

Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells of one Rabbi who went on a campaign against price gouging. But unfortunately stories of people protecting the poor from the practice are rare. More common is a reference in the Mishna that costs of birds had risen so fast that women were lying or aborting their babies to avoid the required and punitive fees.

**The changers (*kermatistes*)** were needed because neither the animal offerings nor the temple tax could be paid with the Roman currency in use throughout the nation, because it had pictures (“graven images”) of the Roman Emperor on them who claimed to be a god. So, the money had to be changed into usable local currency.

The money changers, sat outside of the temple proper, in the “court of the gentiles.” They bought and sold money as a part of the functioning of the general economy. Jerusalem, in fact, required a money changing industry because it was an international city that dealt in a number of currencies and people had to have a system by which they could buy and sell them. The elites used the money changers both for commerce and also for currency speculation. “Insider traders” could make fortunes when a new Roman battalion came to town

<sup>1</sup> Among others, see Malina & Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, “This incident represents ... prophetic actions symbolizing the temple’s destruction,” p. 73. And John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus, The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), who says it attempted to symbolically end the temple’s “fiscal, sacrificial, and liturgical operations,” p. 358.

<sup>2</sup> The Synoptics are probably more historically accurate when they place the story at the end of their Gospels instead of at the beginning as in John. But all four agree that it is his first visit.

<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus, The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (1991), p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> You may recall that Jesus’ parents, who were very poor, brought two turtle doves for the dedication of Jesus (Luke 2:24).

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Goebel, “The Gospels: The testimonials of Jesus Christ” [onefamilyoutreach.com/Bible/John/jn\\_2\\_13-25.htm](http://onefamilyoutreach.com/Bible/John/jn_2_13-25.htm) (2002).

carrying a glut of new coins which depressed the value of the local currencies. Myers says “we must see the money changers as street level representatives of banking interests of considerable power.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, because there was no one else to perform the function, the money changers were the banks in first century Palestine.

However, the Money Changers were also corrupt. They would not only exaggerate the fees they had to charge for the transactions, they would also inflate the exchange rate. The result was that for a poor person, the Money Changer’s share of the temple tax was about one day’s wages and his share of the transaction from international to local currency was about a half-day’s wages. And that was *before* they purchased their unblemished animals for sacrifice and then had to buy new ones (at an enhanced price) because the inspector found them to be blemished after all.

All told, a one day stay in Jerusalem during one of the three major festivals could cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 dollars and Jews were required to attend at least one of them each year. Josephus estimated that up to 2.25 million people visited Jerusalem during Passover, which would generate hundreds of millions of dollars in today’s value.<sup>7</sup> The money-changers opened their stalls in the country towns a month before the feast and then moved them to the temple by the time of the first arrivals. While all of this may appear immoral, none of it was illegal. They were business men simply operating within the law. But it took Jesus and a few radical rabbis to point out that the law itself was unjust.

Two last notes on the tables of the money changers. First, it’s interesting to note that the word, “table” *trapezes*, had just two usages, one was for eating and the other was for conducting financial transactions. *Strong’s* calls it “a broker’s office for loans at interest: bank.”<sup>8</sup> The second thing is that in Isaiah 65:11 God condemns those tables. He says that those who forget God and God’s holy mountain are like those who set up “tables” to “Gad,” the name for the God of wealth.

So, what was Jesus’ response to the situation he found in Jerusalem? He made a whip, drove out the money changers, poured out their coins, turned over their tables and demanded that they “Stop making the realm of God into a realm of commerce.” It’s interesting to note that he doesn’t say “stop abusing a good system,” but simply “stop the system.”

Those who today believe the current economic system has failed, fall into three types. Those who believe first that the system itself is wrong (the very *fact* of markets creates rich and poor, and that’s wrong); second, that this *particular model* of economic globalization is wrong (other systems could be more fair, but this one is not); and third, that the system is fine, but there are abusers and discontinuities within it (if we could just get markets to work then all boats will be lifted). Jesus seemed to come down on number one, the very existence of the market at all. Or, perhaps more radically, against the *marketization* of life itself.

<sup>6</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis, 1991), p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Goebel, “The Gospels: The testimonials of Jesus Christ,” [http://onefamilyoutreach.com/Bible/John/jn\\_2\\_13-25.htm](http://onefamilyoutreach.com/Bible/John/jn_2_13-25.htm), 2002.

<sup>8</sup> It might be interesting to note that in the movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” we learn that it is Jesus who invented the tall table for sitting.

To make his point even stronger, he followed his actions with the dramatic pronouncement that the temple itself, the national center of worship, trade, and finance, would be destroyed.<sup>9</sup> In Mark’s version he even sets up a type of boycott of all goods and commerce coming into the temple, which starved it of the funds it was using to fatten the rich.<sup>10</sup>

### So how would you preach on this passage?

First, walk through the story with your congregation, using the background information in this essay. Most people, even if they know of the story, have no idea of the economic ramifications of the “cleansing.” Given the confrontation at the temple, it is no wonder that the Synoptics believed it to be the key event that turned the authorities against Jesus.

Second, tie this ancient oppressive system to today’s global system that continues to keep two-thirds of the world in poverty. Use material from your Jubilee Congregations packet to show how structural adjustment programs, which are imposed on poor countries as a condition of their participation in debt cancellation programs, actually increase poverty. Tell a story from your packet about how one country struggled to live under the hardships of the debt. Use material from recent Jubilee Alerts to show how development banks, such as the World Bank and the IMF, have been attempting to back off or stall the (modest) debt cancellation plan voted on last summer by the G-8.

You could conclude by saying that as people of faith, we cannot ignore the world beyond our doorstep. God stands with the powerless against the powerful. Isaiah attacked the rich for their opulence: “Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures” (2:7a). Jeremiah said they “have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness” (2:8). Amos said that unchecked, the wealthy would “trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land” (Amos 8:4, cf. 2:7, 4:1). For him, the special, spiritual sin of the economically powerful was that they could lounge on couches, eat lambs from the flock, drink wine from bowls, but “are not grieved over the ruin of [their poor neighbors]” (6:4-6).

Both Jesus and his cousin John demanded great financial sacrifices of those modeling and entering into the coming “Realm” of God. Jesus railed against the abuses of power by Herod and the religio-political leaders of Jerusalem. We are his offspring and followers. With a world still wracked in pain today we can do no other than to walk with faith in his footsteps.

<sup>9</sup> This is debated, but see above on n. 1. Within the ancient texts the range runs from Mark, who denies that Jesus said it so many times that it resembles “damage control,” to Thomas (71), which simply states that Jesus said it with no qualifications. Crossan believes Thomas to be the more historical because it is simple, straightforward and unapologetic.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 11:15-19. See especially, Mark 11:16 “and he blocked (*aphi•mi*) anyone from bringing any goods, equipment, or vessels (*skeûos*) from coming through the temple.”