

A Message from Godfrey

This reading comes as part of a series throughout Lent that is designed to show the Messianic nature of Jesus' ministry. The first miracle, the changing of the water into wine at the Wedding in Cana, shows us that Jesus is a miracle worker. Prior to this we saw the baptism of Jesus as the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah- "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased". This was understood as a Messianic prophecy. Here the disciples saw more clearly Jesus as the Messiah who burned with zeal for God's house. This was a very direct act- a violent act.

Jesus cleanses the temple - his Father's house, by John Chrysostom (347-407 AD)
"But why did Christ use such violence? He was about to heal on the Sabbath day and to do many things that appeared to them transgressions of the law. However, so that he might not appear to be acting as a rival to God and an opponent of his Father, he takes occasion to correct any such suspicion of theirs... He did not merely 'cast them out' but also 'overturned the tables' and 'poured out the money,' so that they could see how someone who threw himself into such danger for the good order of the house could never despise his master. If he had acted out of hypocrisy, he would have only advised them, but to place himself in such danger was very daring. It was no small thing to offer himself to the anger of so many market people or to excite against himself a most brutal mob of petty dealers by his reproaches and the disruption he caused. This was not, in other words, the action of a pretender but of one choosing to suffer everything for the order of the house. For the same reason, to show his agreement with the Father, he did not say 'the holy house' but 'my Father's house.' See how he even calls him 'Father,' and they are not angry with him. They thought he spoke in a more general way, but when he went on and spoke more plainly of his equality, this is when they become angry".

On this passage Alan Garrow, an Anglican theologian once wrote, trying to put the whole thing into perspective.

"A man walks into a dining room, sweeps all the food of the laden table and then sits on the table himself. What is he saying? There are several possibilities. He could be complaining about the food; he could be saying that he is in need of psychiatric help. Alternatively he could be saying, "I am the meal."

While Jesus' contemporaries might have thought that Jesus was insane when he cleared the Temple, he was really acting out a simple visual parable. The animals were on sale to be used as sacrifices. By clearing them out, and standing in their place, Jesus was saying, "I am the true sacrifice that replaces this imperfect and abused sacrificial system." His statement about the temple follows the same pattern. Thus he explains that the temple's function, as the focus of God's relationship with his people, will be replaced and surpassed by, and in, himself."

The earthly ministry of Jesus was radical, dramatic and must, at times seemed to have been very confusing. The Jews were used to prophets, coming and sitting on the table having thrown all the food on the floor. Isaiah and Jeremiah and even John himself must have appeared to have been a very strange lot of people. For generations the Jews had become familiar with the ranting and railing of the prophets with their message of repentance tinged with a healthy element of doom and gloom. The prophets had often made great claims about the validity of their message but one had never challenged in the same way as Jesus who struck right at the heart of the Jewish religious establishment. Remember those words of St John Chrysostom:

"He did not merely 'cast them out' but also 'overturned the tables' and 'poured out the money,' so that they could see how someone who threw himself into such danger for the good order of the house could never despise his master."

Jesus threw himself whole heartedly into the cause of reform and this would inevitably put him on a collision course with the Jews. These were radical actions for radical times.

As the invitation to the prayers of Penitence during the Epiphany season reminds us that “The grace of God has dawned upon the world through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for us to purify a people as his own.”

We see the claims of the rebuilding of the Temple in three days as a perfect example of hindsight being perfect vision. All that had gone before would change very quickly by God’s direct intervention into his world in order to save it. But we cannot deny that those three days on the cross and in the tomb were to bring into being the new order that we have today. Jesus’ actions as he moved from Capernaum to Jerusalem were to bring about the new order. He left no-one in any doubt about the urgency of his message- how he was prepared to go to any lengths to challenge the old order so as to bring in the new.

Today we see the need for purification- for purging ourselves of the old order in the same way that Jesus left the world in no possible doubt about the need for reform and change within the religious establishment of his day. And so it goes on today as we attempt to follow the radical teachings of our Lord.

Amen.