

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2015, 10.30am CWHC Beverley Minster

John 2:13-22

Wait for it.... Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...

The saga of the Minster Chairs has been quite a big part of my life for the past few months - not least since the day that the Yorkshire Press printed our home phone number instead at the one at the Virgers' office as the one to ring for 'would you like a chair' enquiries. I gather we have raised a reasonable amount in donations and it seemed a fitting way to say farewell to our good and faithful 'oak and leather' and I know of at least one family locally who now anticipate sufficient seating for the table on Christmas Day. I also understand that the plaque marking the arrival of our outgoing chairs in 1972 was rediscovered in the sorting and has been given over to June Atkinson's as it was her father who was instrumental in their purchase for £12.10s each. Is June here?

So... this morning's gospel reading. It is a familiar story to Christians – Jesus turning the traders out of the Temple. He obviously means business; John's gospel tells us that Jesus made a whip out of cords to drive everyone and everything (sheep and cattle) from the Temple area. This gospel places the incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and really sets the scene for the challenges Jesus made and is still making to all of us, but especially those in high places.

So what was it that made Jesus so angry? – because he certainly was - and we're not used to Jesus being angry.

Was it that people were buying and selling things in the Temple Courts? Is trading a wicked act? Well, not really. Everyone has to buy and sell things in the course of their daily routine, and in first century Jerusalem, Jews travelling into the city for the Passover needed to buy animals for their sacrifices. The traders at the Temple were perhaps offering a service to the pilgrims who would not want to bring animals with them in case they did not survive the journey unblemished. This practice was not new.

I want to suggest that Jesus was angry because of the way the traders were behaving and the way that those in authority in the Temple were letting them. The approach may have been something like this: 'Here we are, all these people coming along for the Passover, they'll all want to make their sacrifices to put themselves right before God. We'll put out the line that only our animals are good enough and they have to buy them here so we can charge a premium for them, and they have to buy them with our money so we'll make them change their money here and we can make a few quid on that as well. They'll all be very weary after their journey, so there won't be any argument, and we can look religious and they'll feel blessed because of it. They go away happy – and we make a killing!

Do you feel indignant at such a shocking description? No wonder Jesus got cross!

All very cosy, until Jesus comes along and describes it, using the words of the prophet Jeremiah, as a 'den of thieves'. A den is cave or a hidden place where robbers or predatory animals go to hide and to share out the spoils, mistrusting each other all the while.

People were coming from far and wide in penitence and faith and should have been able to put their trust in the Temple authorities. Instead they were being exploited in the name of God Almighty. This was not a priestly ministry!

Jesus was angry, not because someone had sold a young goat or a pair of pigeons in the Temple courts so that faithful pilgrims could make their sacrifices. He was angry because of the cynical exploitation of those who came to worship by those who were betraying their sacred duty. A monstrous crime – and Jesus, who looks right into the hearts and minds of men and women– knew what they were doing.

Did anyone ever have one of those teachers – maybe you are or have been one of those teachers – no matter what you'd done, or said you'd done – they always seemed to know. As if they could see

right through you, and know exactly what story or excuse you were preparing. And they were always one step ahead of you.

A minor story, I know, and some of you may have heard me say this before because I use it a lot as an example, but once – and only once – in a fit of panic at university when I hadn't done my essay and I couldn't put the tutorial off any longer, I copied two whole paragraphs from an academic article because I felt it fitted with what I wanted to say and it gave me an essay. When I arrived at the tutor's room I sat down and began to read my essay. As I progressed I noticed a journal open on the table which seemed familiar. The stuttering and stammering started when I realised it was open at the exact page of the exact article that I had copied my two paragraphs from. "Oh yes," said my tutor, when I spluttered to a halt "that's professor so-and-so's argument isn't it. We had a discussion on the matter when I met her for lunch last week." Nothing else was said, and I never copied anything ever again.

I imagine that's how it must be, standing before Jesus, only more so. There is nowhere to hide. As the living God on earth he knows every nook and cranny of your heart and soul and mind. And he knew the hearts and minds of those traders in the Temple.

The rules on trading were quite clear. Leviticus chapter 19 verse 35: "*You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity*" nor, we might add, by adding hidden extras or asking extortionate rates. Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 13-16: "*Do not have two differing weights in your bag – one heavy and the other light – You must (be) accurate – The Lord God detests anyone who acts dishonestly.*" Such an attitude is directly contrary to the abundance and generosity of God – a God who ultimately would give up his life on a cross that his unfaithful and disobedient people might be reconciled to himself.

So what things today would make Jesus angry?'

Here's an example: Have you ever tried to get a loan from your bank by going into the local branch? If your circumstances are anything other than those prescribed by the set of rules laid down by those in Head Office far, far away, you won't be successful. The local branch manager has no power to vary the decision which has already been made elsewhere. There is no local hierarchy, and one reason given for this is that it is to prevent local corruption. Rules are set so they can't be bent, especially not since everything is regulated by computer. However, what happens if the 'Head Office' far away is actually operating like a 'den of thieves', seeing an opportunity to make money for themselves whilst keeping everyone else in the dark about what is going on. In a nutshell, this seems to have been what happened in the PPI scandal. The people who were supposed to be the guardians of trust for everyone behaved in a way which betrayed that trust. They would do this believing that no one would find out. "We'll make a lot of money and no one will know. No one is going to come and turn over our tables!" Here is a great hypocrisy, but as Christians, we are assured that God sees the inner workings of everyone's hearts and minds, believers or non-believers, and eventually someone will cry 'foul!'

The banks also, were 'found out' by the financial watchdogs and now have to make reparations. So down the ages, groups which unjustly and unfairly benefit themselves against others do eventually, as we say, have the tables turned on them.

The problem is not the structure itself, whether it is local control or national, but the inner working of the hearts and minds of human beings, coupled with the motivation to resist temptation. When the Monasteries first started there was much about the model that led to social benefits, care for the poor and stability. But anyone who saw part three of the Monasteries on Thursday night (BBC4), could easily see how that institution became corrupt. 6000 calories a day! I wonder how this compares to the regime of the England rugby squad! No wonder monks were called 'Friar Tuck!'

Not only as wealth and power accumulated did the monks become corrupt, but perhaps more so as they began to change their view of God. As we were told, the monks abandoned their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in spirit whilst hypocritically keeping them in name - keeping silent

at mealtimes, but developing the most elaborate and entertaining sign language, for example. Who did they think they were kidding?

In the case of the Monasteries, Henry VIII was the one who turned over the tables, and the monks were stripped of all they had acquired. In this case the process was acrimonious and may be viewed as arbitrary and unfair but it was dramatic and, like the action of Jesus in the Temple, it hit directly at the core of the problem and maybe began the task of setting things right.

When it comes down to it, I'm really quite glad that we have a Messiah who is prepared to turn over the tables of those who like to 'Lord it over' others. I feel very safe with a Jesus who will get angry at wickedness and greed, at arrogance and self-righteousness, even if I find it scary that he knows everything about my innermost thoughts and motivations. For I know that I am not immune to temptation and often, when I hear of instances of wrongdoing large and small, I reflect that but for the grace of God, it might have been me.

We are all subject to temptation, but our faith in God and our knowledge of Jesus Christ helps us to stand firm. If we think that God is distant and far away, or confined in the holy of holies as the leaders of the Temple probably did, then we may not be immune to transgressions. If we think that God is within us and around us, we will have more strength to resist.

But in the end there is nowhere to hide, even for them. As the Psalmist says:

*Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
<sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

God is both immanent and transcendent. Where we think God is will motivate our actions.

In another story that Jesus told, the rich young ruler went away sad, because he couldn't let go of his power or his wealth. As Christians we know that all power and glory belong to God. Now and forever.

Amen

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Reader  
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