

Where anger and courage meet

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Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Erica is a member of the NCCA Executive. It meets three times a year. One of those meetings was last Wednesday evening and Thursday. Erica has a Lenten Study group that meets on Thursday mornings. Guess who had to front up on her behalf last Thursday. But I enjoyed it. The theme of the study was 'Living Hope'. It had some lovely images of hope: e.g. *Hope is the bird that sings while the dawn is still dark*. It also reminded us that St Augustine once said that *hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the ways things are, and courage to make them the way they ought to be*. And so the study invited us to find hope springing from the place where anger and courage intersect. It then asked participants to do a little exercise: write down what it is in today's world that stirs up anger within them; and how they can courageously do something to make it right.

It is very easy to think of lots of things in today's world that might make one angry. If you had to name one, what would be your choice? I said the Palestinian situation. But it might be Zimbabwe; it might be the greed and abuse of economic power that has resulted in this financial crisis; it might be something much more local or personal.

This morning we have heard of Jesus being angry!

This morning we have heard a passage from the Fourth Gospel that tells of Jesus cleansing the Temple. If we know the gospels well, we will know that we have here a very interesting thing. We find that the author has the story in an entirely different place in the life of Jesus from that in the Synoptic Gospels. John's Gospel has it right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, while the other three gospel writers set it at the end. Various explanations are offered! Jesus cleansed the Temple twice. But this is not very likely: if he had done it once, he would hardly have had a chance to do it again. They would have been ready for him!; John is right and the other three gospels are wrong. But the incident fits much better at the end of Jesus' ministry. It is a natural sequence to the Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem and the inevitable prelude to the crucifixion.; It has been suggested that the papyrus sheet containing this story got out of place and was wrongly inserted near the beginning rather than the end. This is possible, but it assumes that the person arranging the sheets did not know the correct order.; It is asserted that John was more interested in the truth than in the facts — that is, he was not interested in writing a chronological biography [the facts] of Jesus' life. He was supremely interested in conveying the **truth** of Jesus as God's Messiah. John was not interested in telling people **when** Jesus cleansed the temple; he was interested in telling people **that** Jesus **did** cleanse the temple, because the cleansing was the act of the promised Messiah. The likelihood is that John put this tremendous incident here to set, at the very beginning of his gospel, the great fact that Jesus was the Messiah of God, who came to cleanse the worship people offered and to open up for people free access to God. It is not the date that John was interested in — that does not matter! His great concern was to show that right at the beginning Jesus can be seen as God's promised Messiah.

This same point can be seen and expressed — perhaps in a deeper way — by considering it in the context in which the author has placed it. It is what we know as chapter 2, where it follows immediately after the author has recounted another incident — the marriage at Cana in Galilee — the turning of water into wine.

John's Gospel is very different from the other three. The first chapter has told us of the person of Jesus — who he is! Chapter 2 sees the beginning of the revelation of the glory of God in

Jesus. The two incidents described in this chapter form a prelude, which represents Jesus' ministry symbolically / metaphorically: the story of the wine is expressly called "the first of the signs", and the cleansing of the Temple symbolises the end — the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The incident of the wine is the symbol of what occurs throughout the whole of Jesus' ministry — the revelation of the glory of God. The wine is Jesus himself as the Revealer of God; and the wine and the water are set over against each other. The water stands for everything that is a substitute for the revelation — such as the Law — everything by which people think they can live (perhaps some might have thought it was the stock market) and yet which fail them when put to the test. So that incident of the wine declares the glory of God shining in Jesus: compared to everything else that people put their trust in, Jesus is the good wine in contrast to water.

The cleansing of the Temple then points to the end! It portrays the meaning and the fate of the Revealer of God. Jesus is himself the Temple, which the Jews will destroy, and who shortly afterwards will be raised anew. These two stories in chapter 2, therefore, announce themes that run through the whole of the Fourth Gospel. That is why the cleansing of the Temple is at the beginning, not at the end. It announces something. But what of the story itself, and its meaning? In the Temple, money-changers were required because Gentile money could not be used to pay the Temple tax or to buy the sacrifices. The Temple tax was one half-shekel — equivalent to almost two days' wages. Many currencies were valid in Palestine; but only Jewish coins could be used as a gift to the Temple — hence, money-changers. But they charged exorbitant rates. They were fleecing the people, who could ill afford it.

Similarly, animals and birds bought for sacrifices had to be inspected for their unblemished quality. If bought outside, they were almost certainly rejected. The price of that rejection was a very high inspection fee; and inside, the prices were much higher. Again, it was bare-faced extortion at the expense of the poor. If we think the temple in our current western society is the stock exchange, we might also think not much has changed. In 1st century Jerusalem, this trading went on in the outer court of the Temple — the Court of the Gentiles.

The Temple consisted of a series of courts: Gentiles, Women, Israelite men, Priests, and the Holy Place. The Court of the Gentiles was the only place to which a Gentile could go to pray — and it was being desecrated — desecrated by the uproar, the rabble (trading / bargaining). No one could pray! No one could worship! Jesus was moved to the depths of his being: seeking people were being shut out from the presence of God; the poor were being fleeced; exploitation was rife. It was injustice! And all, supposedly, in the name of God.

Jesus drove out the animals and released the birds; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and over-turned their tables. Jesus was angry! And he had the courage to do something to make it right. When we think of the way things are in our world today, why should we not also feel anger as Jesus did? How could we not? Another bishop from the mid-fifth century wrote:

Anger, more than any other passion, is wont to trouble and upset the soul. But even anger sometimes renders the soul great benefits. When, in fact, we use it calmly against error or stupidity, to denounce and save, we obtain for the soul additional gentleness, since we are furthering the purposes of justice and divine goodness. And also, when we rouse ourselves strongly against evil we often strengthen the soul. Therefore, one who makes temperate use of anger out of zeal for truth will no doubt be found better in the time of judgment than one who out of inertia was never stirred to anger.

The danger with anger, though, is that it so easily runs out of control. It can lead to the very use of violence that might anger us in the first place. Anger, alone, easily mutates into vengeance and the dark delusion that violence can restore the balance of justice and even prevent further violence. Humanity's ancient mistake! Violence does not solve the mystery of evil but strengthens it.

Whatever it is happening in our world right now that stirs us to anger, it is timely for us to hear this morning of Jesus being angry — angry about injustice, oppression and the exploitation of people; angry about the complete misuse of power to distort the very things that were supposed to give life and hope. With good reason we can say that Jesus' anger was a just anger. And we know that he did not allow that anger to lead to vengeance. If we place it in the correct chronological place in the gospel, we know that within a few days the very opposite will have happened — he will have become the victim of vengeance, executed on a cross — thus, strangely, paradoxically, becoming the source of new life and hope, the promise of God's future for all.

In the study group, we were asked to take the two pieces of paper — the one on which we had written what stirs anger within us, and the one on which we had written some courageous step we would take in response — and to place the 'anger' piece horizontally and the 'courage' piece on top of it vertically to form a cross. We find hope springing from the place where anger and courage intersect.