

**3 March 2024**

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

We thought we had him, you know. He had no answer for us, standing there, utterly shamed.

He'd created a massive stir to begin with though, and for a time it looked as though it was the whole business of the temple and its leaders that had lost honour.

It was near Passover time a little over 40 years ago that it happened. Jerusalem was in those days thriving, not the ruin that it is now, and the city was overflowing with the faithful pilgrims who had come to make sacrifice and to take part in the feast in honour of the deliverance of our people from slavery in Egypt. I had already selected an unblemished lamb for the feast for my young family; I had rehearsed my little son in the questions he was to ask during the feast; a jar of wine had been purchased; and all the leaven I could find in the house had been sold to some Gentiles across the road. I set off for the temple to see how preparations were going there: it was always quite fun, a community event. You never knew who you'd bump into.

Passover: What a portentous time for Jesus to choose to make his scene!

The outermost courtyard, the court of the Gentiles, was busy; busy with converts to the faith of our ancestors, busy too with the faithful coming and going from the inner courts, pausing to do the trade necessary to ensure they could make appropriate sacrifice.

It was of course a noisy marketplace, the traders selling animals for sacrifice: cattle, sheep, doves. There were money changers there too, as in those days it was necessary to exchange the coinage in common circulation for Tyrian shekels, the high-quality silver coins required for paying the temple tax. Bellowing, bleating and cooing animals and birds; the hubbub of haggling over prices and rates of exchange; traders calling out the merits of their animals. What a racket it was!

And indeed it was a “racket”: the exchange rates were unfair; there was price gouging going on at least, and some people were tricked into giving up on the perfectly good animals they have brought with them and forced to buy the “without blemish or defect” sacrifices from the traders. I have since reflected that it was particularly egregious that these sorts of practices were engaged in by those selling doves, the sacrifices required of the poor who couldn’t afford to bring or buy a sheep or cattle beast: of course, it is for the poorest that monopoly pricing has the greatest impact. And I don’t know for sure, but many of my people have suspected that the temple authorities were taking a cut of the proceeds.

I have found myself wondering, how could things have come to this? How could the temple authorities have gone so off course?

And in wondering this, I think there is a warning to us all still.

It is very easy for governments, institutions, and individuals to get so caught up in the small details of activity that they lose sight of the big picture, the ultimate purpose for which, really, they exist.

I don’t know, but I can imagine how it might have gone at the temple. It may have simply been a set of incremental decisions, each seemingly valid. Someone had a bright idea: ‘Look’, he said, ‘it is unreasonable to expect people to show up from all over the land carrying Tyrian shekels, which are hard to get hold of, and to arrive with animals that are still unblemished after a long journey over rocky paths and alongside thorn bushes. Why don’t we authorise some money changers and traders in animals to operate nearby the temple on the Mount of Olives?’

So far, so good.

But then this system of authorisation might have become an end in itself, a sideline business perhaps expected to stand on its own feet; and maybe later expected to turn a profit.

At some stage, someone might have decided that the temple authorities were not really in the business of trade authorisation, so they outsourced it.

Then someone might have become concerned that unauthorised traders were operating alongside the authorised ones out on the Mount of Olives, thus diluting the profits contributing towards the upkeep of the temple. ‘No worries’, says some clever person, ‘we can keep better control if we bring the traders inside the temple courts.’

And if no-one in authority was saying, 'Hey, remember, this is the house of God and not a house of trade', then these incremental decisions could be made which ultimately ran contrary to the whole purpose of the temple.

I guess this phenomenon is not unique to the temple or to Judaism. It is part, it seems, of the nature of fallen humanity.

But I digress. Jesus came into the temple court that day, and seeing what was going on, he paused to make a whip out of cords and then started flailing about, laying into the traders and their animals, herding them all out of there. He turned over the tables, and poured out the coins of the money changers. What a scene! People and beasts running this way and that, bleating and lowing; startled doves flapping out of their broken cages; traders (and others too, no doubt) trying to scoop up the coins scattered on the floor.

And Jesus shouting, "Stop making the house of my Father a house of trade."

It didn't take long of course for a gaggle of the temple leadership to show up: by his actions Jesus had seriously dishonoured the temple and its officials. They needed to restore honour, and the way to do that was by shaming Jesus. "What sign can you show us to prove that you do these things?" they demanded. It was the classic "put up or shut up" of people who believe they have greater honour and power than the one they're addressing. 'We are the legitimate authorities of the temple', they were saying in effect, 'so by what higher authority do you claim the right to act as you have?' And of course, they confidently expected no answer that would serve to change their relative standings.

Jesus answered them, quick as a flash: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it."

It seemed a hopelessly ineffective response, as the authorities were able to instantly retort "It took forty-six years for this temple to be built, and in three days you will raise it?"

And there, they had him.

Jesus had no defence to make to this incontrovertible assertion. He just stood there, silent ..., defeated..., shamed....

The temple leaders had gloating in their eyes; some members of the crowd, too. Others looked at their feet, trying not to meet the eyes of the shamed Jesus standing before them. And after a few minutes, everyone drifted away. That was the end of the matter. Utter humiliation.

But, as it turns out, that wasn't the end of the matter. Jesus was the one to ultimately receive honour – just a couple of years later, during another Passover. And strangely, Jesus' ultimate honour came through the deepest humiliation possible. In fact, this was what Jesus had really been referring to when he offered the "sign" in proof of his authority. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it" he had said. But by "temple", he was meaning his body. The authorities were indeed to come to destroy that temple on a cross on Golgotha. And here again was humiliation for Jesus, but of a different order of magnitude to what he underwent in the temple courts with the authorities. Over and over they dishonoured him: a betrayal by a friend, a trumped up trial with false witnesses, mocked and whipped, stripped, taking the walk of shame carrying his crossbeam through the crowded streets, and then hung to die up on the cross, his weakness and suffering on full view. Crucifixion is not merely a means of death; it is intended to humiliate, to render the victim a worthless *thing*, an object of scorn.

When that happened we recalled the psalm:

Lord, the Lord Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me; God of Israel, may those who hope in you not be put to shame because of me. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.<sup>1</sup>

Again, crucifixion was meant to be the end of the matter: Jesus dishonoured; the honour of the temple and the religious authorities restored. No-one would follow the

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 69:6-9; c.f. John 2:17

cause of such a one so derided. Such a humiliation would be a stumbling block; utter foolishness.<sup>2</sup>

But this time Jesus had an emphatic answer. It was just as he had said: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it.” For rise he did. His destroyed body was resurrected, restored to new life.

And then we started to understand and to believe. Everything Jesus had said and done was true!

The temple authorities and, indeed, every one of us present, didn’t understand it at the time, but Jesus had in fact given the emphatic answer to the question of the authorities. His dying and rising were to be the sign of his authority. Destruction and death did not hold him; it was not the end. And if that is so, then he is no mere man but is the Lord, the one in whom the glory of God is revealed.

I no longer live in Jerusalem; I escaped ahead of the Roman invasion. I had tried to keep up worship in the temple, but once I became a follower of the way of Christ Jesus it became more difficult to worship in the place that was also the source of developing oppression against us. Now our beloved temple is a ruin, and it has caused all of my compatriots to reflect again on where we meet with God: it is a struggle and we hold much grief. But some of us – those who now follow the way of Christ Jesus – while sharing those feelings, now realise that our late brother Peter had remarkable understanding and foresight when he wrote “As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ”.<sup>3</sup>

It is in the person of the risen Lord and in us, his people, that the temple is replaced, because in Jesus Christ the full glory of God resides, in him forgiveness is found, in him is true holiness, in him we are reconciled with God and with one another.

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<sup>2</sup> C.f. 1 Corinthians 1:18-23

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-5

Jesus' humiliation has become his victory; through his dishonour we have the hope of sharing in his glory.

### **Explanatory note**

The fact that John records this event early in his Gospel while the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all place it just before the crucifixion has occasioned much debate. A case can be made for John making a specific editorial decision, using this event as part of framing the whole of the Gospel to follow. A case can also be made for there having been two such events, the first taking place early in Jesus' ministry. For the purposes of this sermon I have taken Klink's preferred approach (pp. 176-178), taking John's timing at face value, and focussing on the honour-shame dynamics that Klink brings to the fore.

### **Sources:**

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