

Sermon on Sunday 7 March 2021

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1. 18-25; John 2. 13-22

Jesus in the Temple

I wonder, when was the last time you lost your temper?

Personally, I come from a family where it isn't really ok to lose your temper. Now, I'm not saying that's a good thing. It means that hurts can fester and issues are unresolved. But losing your temper in my family is seen as a sign of loss of control. As a result, it makes me feel very uncomfortable. It also means I get quite upset and unsettled by people shouting at each other, never mind at me.

I still remember a day, some years ago, I was in a supermarket carpark and a couple were having a bit of a ding-dong. It was mid-February and he had a bunch of red roses in his hand which he had obviously just bought. It seemed that they should have been for her, but they weren't. Eventually she snatched them off him and shredded the flowers, scattering the red petals across the tarmac. As he drove away, she was still hurling abuse at him. I think it's fair to say that she'd lost her temper to the point that she'd forgotten she was in a public place, watched with interest by a small crowd. I admit it upset me.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus loses his temper. It seems that's not something he did often. There are many times when he could quite legitimately have lost his temper, but didn't.

Jesus could have lost his temper with Satan as he taunted him in the desert. He could have shouted at those keen to stone the woman accused of adultery. Jesus certainly would have been quite justified in losing his temper when he was wrongfully arrested, beaten and ridiculed. I'm guessing that losing his temper in those situations wouldn't have resulted in the outcome he desired.

So, the overall impression we get of him is one of calmness and inner peace. True, at times he seems disappointed with people, but he doesn't usually get irritated with them to the point of shouting and throwing things about. The 'temple tantrum' (as it's been referred to) is unusual, and that, perhaps, is why it was remembered in detail later by the disciples.

So why does Jesus lose his temper in the temple?

Jesus and the disciples are visiting the Jews' most holy site, believed to be God's dwelling place on earth. It is the most holy time of year – near to the celebration of Passover. The temple, we are told, is full of animals and people.

The animals were actually a normal feature of temple life – they are there to be sacrificed, which is why there are cattle, sheep and doves. You sacrificed what you could afford, and poor people got a pair of doves. However, you couldn't just bring along your own animal – you had to buy one of those sold at the temple. And you couldn't just pay for them with Roman money. Oh no. Instead, you had to change your everyday coin into special ones issued by the temple – hence the money-changers.

And, of course, this gave those who ran the temple two opportunities to fleece those visitors keen to make a sacrifice.

They could sell substandard animals at inflated prices. And they could make even more money by fixing the exchange rate in their favour.

If you knew this, and those present at the temple that day certainly did, then you would understand why Jesus got so angry. They were making the sacred house of his Father into a market place. He was not just objecting to the presence of the animals, or even the buying and selling. He was objecting to the defrauding of the people. He was objecting to implicating God in that crime.



Although Jesus gets angry, there is evidence this was actually not a spontaneous tantrum. In Mark's version of the event, Jesus also visits the day before, and then returns to cleanse the temple. In John's version, he has time to make a whip from cords. So, this is

probably premeditated. Jesus has chosen to stage this scene, and the reason has to be worth it because it deliberately draws attention to him – from both the temple authorities and the Romans. It seems he really felt this was necessary.

Jesus was angry with the wilful misuse of his Father's house and with the exploitation of worshippers.

But beyond that, the scene allows him to predict the destruction of the temple and draws us on to realise that God is not contained in a sacred building. God is somehow contained in Jesus himself. It allows Jesus to predict his death and resurrection.

By his actions he also claims the Gentiles for God. The area of the temple where this took place was called the Court of the Gentiles. Activities such as selling animals were not permitted in the holier inner precincts with more restricted access. This outer court would have been smelly with dung, full of flies, loud with bleating. Jesus' action was interpreted by early Christians to mean that Gentiles were not to be excluded. Physically and metaphorically the temple was a place of prayer for all peoples. To the Jews, the animal dung and the Gentiles equally defiled the Court. To Jesus, who regularly spent time with the ritually unclean, the solution was not to throw the Gentiles out, but instead to cleanse the temple to show it was a place of worship for all.

Although it seems Jesus had a good reason for his anger, I know that if I'd been in the temple, I'd have felt like I did in the Co-op car park; anxious, threatened and uncomfortable at seeing someone 'lose it', as we might say.

Most anger we see and feel is negative, and anger can be highly destructive. We know that if we feel angry inside, at ourselves or others, but don't do anything about it, it will eat away at us.

Anger can, of course, be used to control others or to get our own way. Even to abuse.

While occasionally anger is inevitable, too much anger within or without us is not good for us. If we feel angry a lot, or live with the persistent anger of another, then we should seek help.

However, it seems that anger for the right reason is sometimes required. That anger in the face of injustice or unfairness might be what's needed, to get things changed.

Which means there's a place for righteous anger in all of our lives. A fire within, that burns in God's cause – that cleanses and changes for the better. An anger against exploitation and exclusion. An anger that results in positive action.

So, a few questions to take away and ponder:

What makes God angry today?

Do we feel called to join in?

When is it ok to be angry?

Amen