

Year B Lent III HTK 2020 The Reverend Robert Holland

No matter where one sits on the political spectrum the last few weeks in Australian politics have been utterly confronting. I'm not just talking about sexual assaults and the like but even more so about the sort of findings that have come out of the Federal Aged Care Royal Commission and the Mental Health Royal Commission here in Victoria.

Both of those Royal Commission reports details graphic accounts of appalling neglect and gross under resourcing, combined with staffing levels that leave far too many people without any possibility of good quality care. In politics, anger can so easily lead to cynicism and despair. More often perhaps our anger at the so called "broken system" that we all lament, leaves us somewhere in the middle, indifferent, disengaged and checked out.

Of course, anger management is not the butt of jokes it once was. It's a set of skills that have saved many a job, many a marriage. We may not always win the battle against the buried fury or the passive aggression that can wreak havoc on our personal and professional relationships, but at least the subject itself is no longer taboo.

In church however anger is almost never talked about. The "niceness" that Christians have taken to be our highest calling has us regularly avoiding conflicts both large and small and leaves us bereft of the skills to distinguish between petty acrimony and righteous anger, between misplacing indignation and anger as both gift and necessity.

As I reread today's gospel in preparation for this sermon, it occurred to me that maybe our first instinct is to 'over-humanize' Jesus — that perhaps we attribute too much of what we see in ourselves to him. And yet, at least in my experience, this is precisely what many have often done. Like you I have often heard people say to justify their own reaction to something or someone, "Well, even Jesus got angry," referring to this exchange between Jesus and the money changers. In fact, I have heard this so often that I have always assumed that Jesus was, in fact, angry. For that matter, I have never seen an artistic depiction of this scene which would suggest otherwise.

And so, I began in my preparation, presuming that Jesus was angry. Even so, for all its extra detail, John's Gospel is the least precise in giving us a reason for Jesus' violent response to what he witnessed in the temple. In the other Gospels we are led to believe that those exchanging money and selling unblemished animals for sacrifice are somehow cheating the poor people who have little choice but to do business with them.

Surely, it's argued, this would-be ample cause for the sort of anger which would result in overturning tables and scattering coins and sacrificial animals. Not so in John's telling.

And yet once Jesus has made a whip of cords and used it.

Once Jesus has made a whip of cords and used it.

Once the money changers are grasping for their coins and dodging overturned tables

Once the sheep and cattle are making a run for freedom, one can only imagine that Jesus would have had to raise his voice to be heard. One might rightly interpret this as anger. Although maybe not...

And yet, the gospel does not exactly describe Jesus as angry. At least not in so many words. Nor do the accounts in Matthew, Mark or Luke. In fact, no actual emotion is attributed to him whatsoever. Rather, the writers of all four gospels simply describe what he does and the response of those who witness it — the disciples and the 'Jews' in John's account.

And so, it is that part of what strikes me now that in John's rendering of the story, 'the Jews' do seem to respond to Jesus in a fairly calm way asking simply, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" This would not seem to be how one would normally respond to one who is angry enough to overturn tables and toss the money changers out. Indeed, I cannot help but wonder if maybe those looking on somehow recognized what Jesus also knew — that his response, however violent, was deeply rooted in his grief at all the ways that what was the 'holiest' of places, the temple at Jerusalem was being desecrated, indeed defiled. Maybe it was expressed in a way that those who witnessed it could see beyond the anger.

And so, for you and me, surely it is an opportunity to look at ourselves and wonder...How are we like those money changers in the temple? How have we in our homes, in our communities, in our places of worship, in our lives together, cheapened the precious gifts of God? And as a result, where and why and how does God grieve?

Does it make a difference to be able to see beyond the anger we first see in the whip of cords and the flying coins and the fleeing sheep and cattle? Does it make a difference to see all of that as rooted deeply in Jesus' grief at what has become of a precious, holy place?

Have we misread Jesus' so-called anger for zeal? As the gospel writer notes the disciples themselves recalled the verse from Psalm 69

“Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2.17)

Perhaps this the most important lesson that can come out of the gospel. Where do we place our zeal?

Do we just lament and move on or are we prompted to think again about our role in society and our obligations?

If we see injustice do we allow our zeal to consume us or is it just dissipated in handwringing?

We need to use this Lent as an opportunity to make time to pray and seek God's will, just as Jesus did throughout his ministry.

I value this building as a place and house of prayer, even more so as I enter it each morning and night to say my Office. It would be good if it could be open more often as it has been in the past, particularly at midday, for an hour. Certainly, now that we have vaccines being delivered across Australia and double bagel or doughnuts days are more common, we can once again explore ways of reaching out to the wider community.

