

Lent 3
Year B 2021
John 2:13-22

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Today we hear of Jesus' efforts to clear the Temple.

The various versions of this gospel are commonly known as the "Jesus Cleanses of the Temple".

Many of us have a version of this passage from Scripture etched into our memories after hearing it yearly.

In the Synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, the events occur much later in each of those gospels than in the version we hear today from John.

The Synoptics place the temple clearing directly prior to Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, the subsequent trial and crucifixion.

However, this is not the case for the gospel according to John.

In just the second chapter,
Jesus travels to the temple
after performing his first signs at the wedding in Cana.

In John, Jesus has yet to make
his controversial and provoking entry
through the crowds gathered in Jerusalem
for the Passover.

This is the first of three pilgrimages
Jesus will make to Jerusalem in the gospel of John.

Historically speaking, there was nothing amiss
when Jesus arrived at the Temple.

The normal practices,
which supported the temple's sacrificial rights,
were in place and ongoing.

The temple during the first century was a complex institution.

The sacrificial rights were administered in the Temple
according to biblical law
by priests born to the priestly lineage.

However, the Roman authorities appointed the chief priest
who served the interests of Rome over those of the Jews.

This setup caused resentment by the Jews
because of the inherited status of the temple priests,
their allegiance to Rome,
and their distance from the those
who suffered greatly under the Roman powers.

It is important to note,
the temple priests in the first century
were not in any sense religious leaders of the people.

Rome benefited greatly from
the income of the temple marketplace
which supported the sacrificial rites.

Jesus would have clearly understood
the relationship between Rome and the temple priests.

Jesus would also have understood
the immense burden on the people
to meet the requirements for sacrificial rites
which served as a significant financial benefit to Rome.

When Jesus appears,
makes a scene and disrupts this commerce,
He knows he will be attracting the attention of the Imperial powers,
and not in a good way.

He also knows, He will be gaining the attention of the people.

He's keenly aware that his actions
will not go unnoticed by those
up and down the power structure.

It is not a stretch to surmise that
Jesus' anger was related to
the complicity of Roman and temple authorities.

A system of complicity that caused undue burden
on the people for whom the temple
was intended to be the premiere place
where they could experience God.

We will see Jesus' continued confrontation of the Roman and temple authorities play out in the weeks ahead as we travel through Lent.

Jesus is highlighting for us the complexity of state/church relationship from its earliest inception.

We are at a time in history when this relationship is highlighted as well.

How do we, as followers of Christ, understand these dynamics?

We see a diminishment of morality, or what we might think of as Christian principles, throughout society, and government as well as religious institutions.

Where do we, as self professed Christians, fit in with attempts to address civil issues which we believe are rooted in our religious beliefs?

In the past few years, but certainly throughout 2020, we have been confronted with issues of systemic racism in policing, our judiciary, health care, education, food security and in our workforce.

How are we being called to follow Jesus into these difficult but critically important areas which need reform?

When does our faith lead us to challenge civil authority?

We have many examples of Christians in our country who have defied civil law in support of their religious beliefs, not the least of which is the late Representative John Lewis.

What would that look like for us, in our time and place?

When do our secular laws compromise our Christian values?

In the United States we highly value the separation of church and state but in reality there is no precise definition or understanding of the division which can guide us.

How are we to respond when places of worship demand the right to gather for religious services in the time of pandemic when science definitively shows the resulting health risks of such gatherings?

Is that an appropriate time to demand support of the division of church and state?

How are we to understand religious institutions accepting government funds, in the form of the Payroll Protection Act, when they have never contributed through taxes to the funds from which they received this help?

Is this an appropriate time to push aside the division of church and state?

How do we feel about places of worship
sitting on some of the wealthiest properties
in some of the poorest neighborhoods and cities
without paying revenue into those governments from which they receive the
benefit of infrastructure, fire, and police services, just as an example?

Is this a time to look into reform of the church state relationship?

Have we grown into the temple institution?

It seems to me,
Lent is a good time to wrestle with
the difficult or unpopular decisions
we make as we walk the way of the cross.

When, where and how are we called
to take action which will undoubtedly
pull us out of our comfort zone
in support of our values through engagement with our secular society?

Where are we, as followers of Christ,
being called to examine the reality of
the enmeshed nature of our civil and religious lives?

How might we feel called as people of faith,
to show forth our beliefs in working to reform
the corrupt, outdated and inept systems in our city, state and nation?

During this Lenten season,
how will we, individually,
and collectively as the parish of St. Andrew's,
step into the public arena and make known injustice?

During this Lenten season,
how will we, individually,
and collectively as the parish of St. Andrew's,
step into the public arena and work for justice?

We have the vision of Jesus' actions to guide us
so, it seems to me, the question for us is:

What does it look like to follow Jesus in our time and in our place?