



THIRD SUNDAY LENT 2006

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

“The Jews asked for signs, and the Greeks looked for wisdom.” Paul replied that Jesus is the Power of God and the Wisdom of God, so both will find what they are seeking. However, the expectations of power and wisdom will be overturned because the power and wisdom of God will be manifest in weakness and folly. With these words from the first letter to the Corinthians Paul reminds us of some lessons that we need to learn if we are to understand discipleship of Christ crucified.

What Paul seems to be saying is that our preconceived ideas about God may need to be re-examined. Lent is a good time for some spiritual evaluation and revision.

The Gospel of today and the first reading concern our right relationship to God. This Gospel story is about a protest. Jesus responds to the scene before him in an instinctive manner. He sees he acts. When a situation is judged to be out of kilter, we are driven to act immediately. Sometimes we pause too long, the moment passes or we lose our nerve.

The action shows Jesus in the heat of anger, rushing forward, grabbing up some of the flax from the floor and using it as a kind of whip or broom to sweep all before him. For the disciples, as well as the traders, the shock would have made the event seem larger than life.

What triggered such an explosion from Jesus? The sights, sounds and smells of the scene before him. Jesus had come to the temple to pray and he could be forgiven for thinking he'd come to the wrong place. He was in a bustling market. The building, not only erected to the glory of God, but also the home of God's real and abiding presence, was being debased.

Animals to be sold for sacrifice were present, giving the temple keepers an economic advantage. The rules also required that money used in the temple could not carry a pagan ruler's head and inscription. This was exploited as another money-making venture. What an introduction to the house of God!

All this crass materialism offended Jesus and he acted. In such a concrete response, Jesus resembled the great prophets who often

made a theological point in a very visible action. This was not lost on the participants and observers.

Jesus' challenge is picked up by a counter-challenge to his right to act in such a prophetic role.

"Give us a sign to show that you have authority to act as prophet."

Jesus could have answered by quoting the Commandments or citing any of the regulations concerning the holiness of the temple but his questioners prevented that by their demand.

Jesus offers a sign.

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

This is a typical Semitic riddle answer.

At one level, Jesus is offering them a simple way to test him. Let them destroy the temple and he will rebuild it. Of course they couldn't take up the challenge so they replied by arguing logistics. "It's taken forty-six years so far."

The evangelist writing after the death and resurrection of Jesus gives a theological overlay. He says that Jesus was referring to himself and his death. Such a dramatic challenge would have been remembered so it was easy for the disciples to make such a connection.

The shift in Christian tradition away from the temple as a religious focus, which was forced by the deterioration in relationships between the Jewish and early Christian communities, may have led the communities to reflect on another aspect of God's presence. Later in the Gospel, John will have Jesus describing the presence of God as the indwelling. The house of God is the heart of the disciple. As with the temple was a visible sign of God's presence, so we are challenged to retain as our primary focus the glory of God visible in our daily lives.

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