

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:11-22

REVERENCE
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Beware of false prophets

We've come to the third Sunday in Lent, and the lectionary readings for today provide us with an interesting pair of bookends. The Old Testament reading is the pivotal chapter in the book of Exodus, where God provides Moses with the Ten Commandments, the founding document of the entire Jewish religion. And then when we come to the new Gospel reading, we find John's version of an episode recounted in all four gospels, in which Jesus for the only time in all the accounts, engages in an act of violence, when he takes a whip to the money changers and animal merchants and drives them out of the temple.

Today we'll think a little about why these two readings might have been juxtaposed with one another, and what that might teach us about the meaning of Lent.

As I said, this episode is also reported in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but there is this interesting difference from John in their reports. The other Gospel writers all place the cleaning of the temple at the end of Christ's ministry, occurring just after he's made his final entry into Jerusalem a few days before the crucifixion.

John, however, places it right at the beginning of the ministry, happening right after the first miracle, the turning of water into wine at the marriage ceremony in Cana.

Without going into the weeds of detail, we can say with a fair degree of confidence that the other three Gospels writers got the chronology right, and that it happened near the end of the ministry, and in fact was probably an important reason for Christ's final and fatal persecution; while John was the one who took historical liberty in placing it so early. This would not be unusual for John. As one great Bible scholar put it long ago: John was interested in the truth, not just the facts.

But the question then arises, what *was John* communicating to us by mentioning this episode right at the beginning of his Gospel. Let's begin by reading his version of the event.

John 2:11-22

I mentioned that John records the cleansing of the Temple as having happened right after the miracle at Cana, and we see that established here. According to John, after the miracle, Jesus and his family and new disciples went to Capernaum and stayed there a few days, and then proceeded directly to Jerusalem.

Clearly John was juxtaposing these two events, and wants us to think about them together. And if we do that, I think it becomes pretty clear what John wanted the temple episode to signify.

The meaning of the miracle at Cana is certainly clear. Wine is the image Jesus uses elsewhere for his Gospel, the good news of God's perfect love for His children, and the meaning of the miracle was that Jesus has come to replace the water of the old Jewish religion with the wine of the new.

And if we grant that, then the uses that John intends to make of the cleansing of the temple which comes immediately after becomes clear. John wants us to see the elements of the old Jewish religion that Jesus wants to eliminate, to cleanse, from his new Gospel of grace. But he also wants to show us the respect Jesus still maintained for his native faith, once it had been brought back to its undefiled beginnings.

The two targets of Jesus' wrath were the money changers and the animal merchants. There were money changers in the temple courts because people came from all over the known world to make monetary offerings and also to pay an obligatory temple tax, and they brought with them the coinage of their different lands and regions: those from Italy would have Italian money, those from Turkey Turkish money, and so on. But foreign money was regarded as unclean, and not allowed within the Inner Courts of the temples, so it would have to be exchanged for native Jewish coin, and that's why there were money changers in the outermost court.

The problem was that these moneychangers charged exorbitant rates, essentially fleecing the poor pilgrims who had travelled all the way to Jerusalem to show their reverence. It was rampant and shameless social injustice, and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion.

And there was similar chicanery afoot among the animal merchants. According to Jewish law, any animal brought into the temple for sacrifice had to be spotless and unblemished, and there were inspectors in the outer court to check any animals – the sheep and oxen and doves – that the worshippers brought with them. These inspectors, however, were in cahoots with the animal merchants, so any animal brought in from

outside was certain to be declared unclean. Everyone knew, therefore, that they would have to buy their sacrificial animals from the animal vendors in the outer court, who in turn, like the moneylenders, charged extravagant fees. Pure fraud and injustice, and once again being done in the name of religion.

That was the reason for Jesus' wrath. The injustice, yes, but far more forcefully, injustice being done under the guise of religion.

This was one of Christ's central concerns, and that's almost certainly one of the reasons John put this episode here at the beginning. The part of human nature that yearns for spiritual comfort and guidance is also perhaps the most innocent and naive part of human nature, and the most easily manipulated.

Remember what Matthew records in the ninth chapter of his gospel, when Jesus traveled all over Galilee, healing and teaching. Here's what Matthew wrote:

36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, while giving his summation and final warnings, Jesus says:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

To put it in a single word, the problem with the money changers and the animal merchants was their irreverence. That's a solemn word that has lost a lot of its true meaning in modern times. These days we take it to mean something like prankishness or humorous cynicism.

But the word is a much deeper word than that, and its true meaning arises out of the very first Commandment, the one that opens our selection from Exodus. Let me read it again:

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

20:3 you shall have no other gods before me.

20:4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

20:5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God

Being irreverent in the deep sense means to pretend to worship God, while in fact worshipping some other idol, to use the appearance of piety to accomplish aims contrary to the will of God.

The irreverence of the courtyard merchants and moneychangers was the cause of Christ's great anger, but John teaches us it was also a great fear Jesus harbored for his own Gospel.

And of course that fear was warranted. The history of Christianity has unfortunately been tainted over and over by examples of those using the credulity of the faithful for their own enrichment, and that continues to the present day. Preachers with private jets and television peddlers of vials of holy water and prayer cloths with miraculous healing powers are simply the modern versions.

The season of Lent is a good time to remind ourselves that the religion of Christianity, of those who follow Christ and attempt to model their lives after his, is not a rejection of the religion out of which it grew, but rather a reaffirmation of the purity of its original intent – to place God at its center. Where we find elements of lives – most importantly the elements of worship, praise, and Christian service – elements that rest on something other than loving obedience to a loving God, perhaps we may seek to reorient them through prayerful reflection and petition.

And so our prayer for this third Sunday in Lent, heavenly Father, is that you help us remember that the message of Christ is not to place our blessings at the center of our worship, but rather You, from whom all blessings flow, because that's what Jesus did, and we pray in his name.