

LENT COURSE WEEK TWO

The Cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21: 10-19)

Christ driving the traders from the Temple – El Greco (1541-1614)



A word about the artist; El Greco, was born in Heraklion on the island of Crete, Greece and given the name Domenikos Theotokopoulos, he was also a sculptor and architect of the Spanish renaissance. He was particularly inspired by the works of Michelangelo and Raphael. His most notable religious paintings include “Christ carrying His cross”, The Disrobing of Christ” and the painting we have before us now “Christ driving the traders from the Temple” El Greco was so taken with the subject of this painting that he actually painted four different versions both in Italy and in Spain. The one we have before us was completed in 1600 whilst El Greco was in Toledo. It hangs in the National Gallery, the other three are in New York, Venice and Rome.

The incident is recorded in St Matthew, chapter 21, you may like to look at the painting as it is read. (*Read Matthew 21: 10-19*).

All four Gospel writers record this incident. John places it towards the beginning of Jesus’ ministry whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke place it as part of the events leading up to Jesus’

arrest, leading some Biblical scholars to reason that John's account was a separate visit entirely and not connected with the events of the Passion.

But Matthew, whose account we have just heard, tells us that when Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was in turmoil. It was, of course, the time of the Passover. Huge numbers of visitors would have been in Jerusalem and the crowds would have been very volatile. We know that the same crowds which greeted Jesus with the words "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" were the same crowds who would later shout "Crucify Him!"

El Greco encapsulates something of this volatility in his painting – The money changers and dealers on the left are writhing in turmoil as Jesus wields the whip of chords. The Apostles who accompanied Him and some other visitors to the Temple are on the right. They look on with amazement as they witness Jesus' violent reaction to what He finds. Jesus is angry, so angry He is driven to violence. His followers have never seen Him like this before. The table at the front of the painting overturned and even broken encapsulates the chaos of the moment.

Jesus has come to His own city and to His Father's house of prayer, no doubt with the Hosanna's of the applauding crowd still ringing in his ears. He comes to the Temple, the Holy of Holies and finds, in place of prayer, corruption and extortion. The keepers of the Temple are more intent on making money and propping up an immoral system, than enabling pilgrims to make their offering to God.

Centuries earlier the psalmist had predicted "Zeal for your house has consumed me." Here we see zeal and anger in the cause of justice. The prophet Malachi had also predicted this moment when he wrote "The Lord, whom you seek, will come suddenly to His Temple, even the messenger of the Covenant in whom you delight. But who may abide the day of His coming for He is like a refiner's fire and He will purify the sons of Levi that they may offer to the Lord an offering of righteousness."

The sacrificial system, the reason why the dealers were there, had to be done away with. Such was the level of corruption that honest and often poor pilgrims to the Temple were being grossly overcharged. The Temple authorities, in cahoots with the dealers had set up a cartel whereby pilgrims could only purchase the sacrificial animals they wished to offer from the Temple-approved dealers who would charge inflated prices. Furthermore they could only buy using Temple currency for which they had to pay a high exchange rate for their own currency. The situation was further exacerbated when the number of pilgrims was at its highest; then, because all the animals could not be slaughtered at once, some were "held back" and actually resold to other pilgrims. The whole process was riddled with corruption.

No wonder, then, Jesus displayed His anger; this is the only incident in the whole of the Gospels where Jesus shows violence, such was the depth of His frustration that honest worshippers were being taken advantage of in such a flagrantly dishonest way.

Jesus by now knew that He had come to make possible a direct access to God in a purer offering of worship where His own body would replace the endless sacrifices; The offering of His own body, whose acceptance by His Father was not only guaranteed but was also all sufficient and for all time. He had said "I will destroy this Temple made with human hands and in three days raise up another, not made with human hands." Here, of course, Jesus points to His own Resurrection, the means by which, in St Paul's words, "each of us is able to present ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and accepted by God."

So Jesus' anger here has the highest of motives; our direct access to God, made possible by the sweeping away of all that hindered or distracted people from true worship.

Is there a message here in that we may need to sweep away something that distracts us from wholly entering in to our worship? Note that when Jesus had turned out the money changers there was heard children singing in the Temple, something which angered the chief priests and scribes, causing Jesus to respond "Out of the mouths of infants and children you have prepared perfect praise."

It is interesting to note here that the subject of the cleansing of the Temple was used in the 16th century as a symbol of the church's need to cleanse itself through the condemnation of heresy and by internal reform.

El Greco makes two further points in his painting; cast your eye to the fake window at the top left and you can just make out Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden. The first Adam had failed and so the second, Jesus, begins the atoning work to make good that and all future failure.

The window at the top right portrays Abraham about to offer in sacrifice his own son, Isaac.

Adam and Eve's expulsion for the Garden of Eden for disobeying God prefigures the expulsion of the corrupt traders in the Temple. The sacrifice of Isaac prefigures Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross for our redemption. Jesus was, in fact, to hang on the cross within a week of this incident in the Temple

But it is that second Adam, Jesus Himself, who dominates the picture as He comes to cleanse, to heal and to restore all things lost by the disobedience of the first Adam and the ongoing disobedience of every generation.

A final reflection; Matthew records for us that the following day Jesus returned to the city and He went to a fig tree on the side of the road looking for fruit but He found nothing but leaves. As a sign, perhaps, of His continuing anger and frustration Jesus curses the tree and it withers. The fig tree, like the Temple, had ceased to fulfil its God-given function and therefor it had no place in His designs. We are at the heart of God's designs and we are called to bear fruit