

Sarah Knoll-Williams, Senior Sermon, 18 March, Jesus in the Temple

I hope you have a vivid picture in your mind of Jesus in the temple. I hope you can see the expression on Jesus' face, with his arms stretching out and his hands grasping table legs and chair backs. I hope you can hear the change clinking to the floor, and the birds flying around, released from their sellers' cages. I hope you have meditated on this Jesus before. If you haven't, I absolutely insist that you do so now.

Many of us have in our imaginations a scene of exceptional violence. Some of us have incorporated the popular image from John's gospel, where Jesus wields a "whip of cords." You may have in mind the punctuation brought to us by our English translators; everything Jesus says ----- exclamation mark, exclamation mark, exclamation mark. Or, if you came to the Church by way of *Jesus Christ Superstar* like I did, you will always picture Jesus running in, rocking and wailing, spilling and slapping, and rather resembling a sexy concert performance of Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant. Whatever you're picturing, I bet you think, at the very least, that Jesus is angry.

As Christians we have built a whole theology of anger around this scene. It is to this very specific passage that we point when we talk of something called "righteous anger." Of course it is OK to be angry, we say to each other, even Jesus got angry when he turned those temple tables over.

But if you've ever tried to tease out of this story a concrete model for how to express anger, you know it's pretty sticky. How confident *are* you that we are allowed to be violent? Jesus could justify railing against corruption in this way, but I'm not sure it simply means we're allowed, or even mandated, to do what he did. I'm not entirely confident I can identify today's money-changer equivalents. And even if I was, I'm still not sure if Jesus was angry with *them*, or with all the poor people who went along *with* them, or even with the entire sacrificial system itself.

Mark's gospel is painting a particular picture that I think has some particular wisdom. Unlike the others, it actually begins the night before. Immediately after those famous hosannas of the triumphal entry, Jesus goes straight into the temple, looks around at everything, realizes it is getting late, and the story goes that he turns back, and walks the two miles back to Bethany where he's staying. The next morning, he gets up, and he and the disciples retrace their steps from Bethany back into the Temple. Jesus has no whip. There are no exclamation marks. He is not running and wailing. Mark calls what Jesus is doing "his teaching". As he moves out the sellers and buyers, and as he turns over tables and chairs, he is quoting scripture. And the people there can hear what he's saying; they are affected by this teaching. They are "spellbound" by it. And then Jesus walks out, back to Bethany, and the next day? Back to the Temple again. And not surprisingly, this time people are waiting for him with a few questions.

You know what I'm picturing? I'm picturing a Jesus who had a plan. I see someone who walked in one evening, stared corruption in the face, and made a conscious decision to walk away from it. He took a long walk home, thinking about it, turning it over in his mind, discerning, deciding what to do. This was the Temple after all, this was Jerusalem, which Jesus longed to gather under his wings. It is a big deal to take on something so sacred to you, so precious. While he walked, I don't think he could help but reflect on what he'd seen with his own eyes: the poor who come to make their prayers, who cannot get through until they submit to the high exchange rate of the corrupt moneychangers.

I'm picturing a Jesus who, having walked and thought, and probably prayed, also decided to return. Back with a plan. And what he returned to do was make a prophetic teaching. This is the kind of teaching you make with your body; the prophets did this all the time. Think of the time God told Isaiah to write strange phrases on tablets and show them to the priests, or when God told him to walk naked and barefoot for three years to teach the people. Even better *today* to think of Jeremiah, who God told to stand in the doorway of the Lord's house and repeat to himself, "this is not the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

When Jesus took that table and put it on end, when he grabbed a fistful of coins and dropped them on the floor, and while he was doing these things quoted the scriptures to people, Jesus is not only telling about the kingdom of God, he's acting it out. Can you imagine being there? It is spell-binding; I think it would be captivating to watch him and listen to him. The gospel tells us he prevented *anyone* from carrying *anything* through the temple. It seems that the people were immobilized by this prophet in their midst. This is not really a picture of violent destruction; maybe Jesus didn't lose his temper. He is not shouting, not whipping, not wailing, but carefully teaching, taking his place in a long traditional way of fighting injustice.

Tomorrow, in San Francisco's financial district, hundreds of people will lie down in doorways, with a prophetic message of their own about the five-year anniversary of the Iraq war. They believe that businesses who profit from war are today's moneychangers. They sell the machinery, they hire out vigilantes, they even mint the US cash that arrives in Baghdad by helicopter. I think it is possible that those who lie down in doorways take their place in the tradition of the prophets, of Mark's Jesus, since they're not just talking about the injustice of the moneychangers but showing what it would be like if their table was turned over. Just for a moment, it will be hard to come and go from these profiteers' doorways, and just for a moment, the cash register will clink with fewer coins.

I believe it is OK to get angry. I don't doubt that Jesus was furious and fuming when he slid from that colt, brushed off the stray palm branches, and walked into the Temple to be greeted by such corruption. Who among us is not angered to see the rich take advantage of the poor? I spend more time being angry than I'd like to admit.

But I think the important part of the story is not that Jesus was angry, but what he did with it. For he took his anger on a long walk, and returned with a plan, a careful, bodily teaching. He was probably still angry, but this way he had channeled it—he could stop the day's business, and teach something that would affect people tomorrow, and the next day. At this point Jesus is drawing very near to his cross. He is taking on the evil of the world; he has many reasons to be angry. This way his anger was used for God's glory.

Every day you can walk in somewhere and see injustice and it can make you angry, (and I hope it does!), and *you* can go on a walk and hold that anger for a minute. Take your anger back to Bethany, and see what happens on the way. Explore the state of your heart. Look in your toolbox for ways of fighting injustice that you have seen actually work. And let your anger be used for God's glory.