

Sermon, January 21, 2024

John 2:13-25
"He Knows You"

Today we find Jesus entering the Temple in Jerusalem, a place that was very central to the life of the Jews. It was during the time of Passover, and many were coming to make a sacrifice. In the outer courtyard of the temple there are many selling animals for that sacrifice. Sheep and cattle were sold to those who were well off, while the doves were purchased by the poor. There were also money changers. Jerusalem, at that time, was an important hub of commerce in the Middle East, and foreign merchants had to go to the money changers to exchange currency. Although these things were important for the life of the Temple, Jesus was obviously angered by the fact that it was taking place the Temple, and, so, using a whip he chased the sheep and cattle out of there, and overturned the tables of the money changers, exclaiming., "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

This story takes place right at the beginning of John's gospel, right after his first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, whereas it takes place at the end of the other three gospels, following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, an act that was probably was the final straw for the authorities, leading to his execution.

So why the difference? Well, it has to do with the nature of John's gospel, which is quite different from the others. John's primary concern was not historical accuracy- his was a highly theological and symbolic text whose main purpose was to proclaim the identity and nature of Jesus Christ, and, to draw attention to the relationship between God and the Son of God. A simple example of that is that in the synoptic gospels he refers to the Temple as "My house", while, in John, he says "My Father's house". Also, in John you will find numerous "I am" statements, such as, "I am the light of the world", "I am the Bread of Life", "I am the gate for the sheep", "I am the true vine". John's gospel was written later than the others, probably at the end of the first century, or the beginning of the second century of the common era, revealing the developing theology of the Christian Church.

Within this gospel you also find various "signs" that speak to who Jesus is. For example, at the end of the story about the changing of water into wine, John writes, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed him". The thing about these signs though is that they lead others to believe that he is a prophet, perhaps, even the Messiah, but the full disclosure that he is the Son of God does not reveal itself until his Resurrection.

Now there is something going on in this story that we might miss reading it in the English translation. The Temple was huge. So big that when Jesus confronted the sheep, the cattle, and the money changers, people in other parts of the Temple would not have known what was going on. Within that huge structure there was a place that we would call a sanctuary. It was referred to as the ' holy of holies' , a place considered so sacred that only one person was allowed to enter it - that was the high priest, and even he was only allowed to enter it once a year. It was thought to be the dwelling place of God.

Now when John is describing Jesus chasing the animals and money changers out of the Temple, he uses the Greek word 'hieron' , which refers to the Temple in its entirety. But, when Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" , he uses the word 'naos', meaning the ' holy of holies' , i.e., the dwelling place of God. And, as John writes, "But he was talking of the temple of his body". In other words, Jesus was talking about himself as the dwelling place of God. He is the Word made flesh. I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.

Now, there are other, more symbolic ways of interpreting Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. It has sometimes been seen as symbolic of being cleansed through the act of baptism. But I think that the image of Jesus chasing the sheep and cattle out of the Temple suggests that there is no longer a need for animal sacrifice, because Jesus, himself, is the sacrifice on behalf of humankind. Through his sacrifice we find a cleansing of our own sin by which we find freedom of spirit.

At the end of our reading today we are told that many came to believe because of many signs - that is, through the miracles he performed. And it goes on to say, " But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed on one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone".

What this suggests is that Jesus 'knows the human heart and does not commit himself to its fragile support'. The question that this raises for us is, what is the basis of our own belief, our own faith? What sort of signs do we need, or are we capable of having faith without the aid of signs? After the Resurrection Jesus has a conversation with the one called Doubting Thomas, and ends by saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". We, of course, have not seen - at least not with our eyes, but there are other ways of seeing with our heart, with our mind, with our spirit. The question is - are our own faculties open to the possibility of encountering and knowing the presence of the Risen Christ? Do you recognize this sanctuary as a dwelling place of God? Are you open to the possibility of the Spirit of Christ dwelling in you? Which leads to the question for next Sunday - are you open to the possibility of being born from above? Amen.

Let us pray: We give you thanks, O God, for this day, and pray that you Holy Spirit guide, lead, and inspire us. Through the word of many witnesses, we too name Jesus as our Christ and Savior, our Light and Life. Shine in our hearts through the light of Christ that we may be signs of your presence here among us, making peace and doing Justice. May we also be a light to our community, through Jesus, your faithful servant. Amen.