

## Jesus Overturning the Economic Tables

Sermon on John 2: 13-22

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Trinity United Church, Ottawa

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This is not the gentle, pastoral Jesus of ‘Jesus loves me.’ Clearly there is another side to his character. This is the radical Jesus, the Hebrew social prophet, getting attention with a shocking and dramatic public act, as the Hebrew prophets had always been wont to do. (Was it the prophet Jeremiah who took off all his clothes in the marketplace to get attention to his message?) Well, Jesus’ prophetic stunt sure worked! He got plenty of coverage! All four biblical Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas as well.

But, can you just imagine the enraged responses to his act of protest that day? A few of you who have been to the Passion Play at Overamergau, described to me the noise and chaos and pigeons aflutter during the scene when the Galilean peasant and his straggly entourage stalked into the Temple, at the height of Passover, and trashed the place! What did he think he was doing?!

More important today: What do we think he was doing? The traditional interpretation is that Jesus was incensed about the sacred space being used as a marketplace, the holy Temple defiled by profit-taking crooks and pagan animal sacrifice. We were always told that Jesus wanted to ‘purify’ or ‘cleanse’ the Temple of this commerce and ritual, so as to restore it to its presumed former sacred purpose. So the message for us was to forego animal sacrifice and keep the profit motive out of our churches, right? That’s easy enough. We’re a not-for-profit organization. And I think most of us aren’t even tempted to burn pigeons here!

With five different gospel versions, the scholars are in rare accord that Jesus *did* trash the outer court of the Temple. But the different words attributed to Jesus by each of the gospel writers certainly leave us uncertain about what he *said*. And

among serious Jesus scholars today, there is also a new slant on what he *meant* by his dramatic symbolic action...and therefore what it means for us.

It seems Jesus bequeathed us a much more radical challenge than just separating the holy from the marketplace. His action was a challenge to the whole oppressive political and economic system of Israel, which was run for Rome through the Temple.

Theologian Paula Frederikson, in “Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews” cites historical research in the past 20 years about first century Palestine. We know now that the very purpose of the Temple since the time of Solomen had been as the place for animal sacrifice. And since travelling pilgrims could hardly carry perfect pigeons and snowy white sheep on their long journeys to Jerusalem, the availability of these animals was essential to the Temple’s sacrificial purpose.

Jews coming from many countries arrived with all manner of foreign currencies in their purses, thus the necessity of conversion to Temple currency, which was the Tyrian shekel, because of its reliably stable silver content. So Jesus couldn’t have been cleansing the Temple of money changing and sacrifices, in order to restore the place to its formerly pure purpose, because sacrifice was always its central purpose. Or if he *was* protesting Temple sacrifice, then his disciples sure didn’t get it! According to many references in Paul’s letters, Jesus’ followers continued to participate in this Temple practice.

So, what was Jesus so incensed about? In “Who Killed Jesus?” John Crossan suggests that Jesus was protesting on behalf of the Jewish peasantry, the very existence of the institution of the Temple. He was warning his society that if it didn’t change, destruction was imminent. Hebrew social prophets, according to the foremost biblical scholar in that field, Walter Brueggeman, characteristically protested the ‘domination systems’ in their society. The systems where political elites maintained an economic stranglehold over the majority, their power legitimized by religion. Jesus’ protest at the Temple fits that picture.

Remember that the Temple functioned not just as the religious centre, but also the political, economic and social centre of his society. There was no concept of the separation of religion and state then. The Temple was run by a small Jewish elite, as the bank of the Roman control system that extorted taxes from the Jewish people until most were reduced to landless peasantry.

Today's equivalent institution to the Temple might be a merger of Wall Street and the Bush Administration with some evangelical Vatican and CNN. Talk about the power of the purse strings! That is the kind of institution that Jesus promised to destroy. He wanted to replace the Temple System for running society with his Kingdom economy, which promised God's justice of 'enough for all.'

Jesus didn't make his fuss in the Temple over a few corrupt individuals. He was publicly indicting the whole unjust economy. Did you know that in our gospels, Jesus had more to say about economics and poverty than about any other subject?

The implications of Jesus' protest in the Temple for us today are much too radical for me! I want to cling to my RSPs and my developed world advantages! But as I contemplate his dramatic protest, I can't help but wriggle in my middle class comfort, and question the economic and political institutions in our time that perpetuate our comfort, and the oppression of the poor. From the 'common sense revolution' that was an assault on the poor in our cities, to globalized free trade policies that teasingly promised a 'trickle down' effect to the poor in developing countries - I think about these things and I have to wonder anxiously - What Jesus would do?

The legacy of Ontario's 'common sense' economics is homelessness. The trickle down effect of prosperity for the poor promised by an international free market economy has left most of the world ever more parched, still awaiting just a drop of Western health, education and prosperity.

I read an intriguing article from Harper's recently, titled "Let There Be Markets:

The Evangelical Roots of Economics.” It traced how the ‘god of the free market’ economy rose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on a wave of evangelical thinking. Believers of that time, including the governor of Ireland during the Potato famine, were sure that the market system of the new industrialized urban economy would create prosperity for all. The governor cancelled food distribution through the church based rural social safety net, to force the starving into the cities where they would ostensibly become productive and independent working in the factories. The death and emigration toll of the Irish potato famine proved that hope for the new industrialized market was displaced. Today too, as the evidence of growing poverty confronts free market promise with crushing reality, our modern economic institutions cling to a ‘belief’ in ‘free market theory’ that is an evangelical leap of faith over fact.

In this new millennium, corporations and governments and institutions like the World Bank are now colluding to make water, the very source of life, a profit taking venture, flowing freely only through the marketplace. With plastic bottles in our hands, and countries where water pipes flow only into the neighbourhoods that can pay, the economics and politics of water are rapidly becoming a domination system indeed. What would Jesus say if he arrived at the well and he couldn’t ask the woman to give him a drink, because it was locked, priced and neither of them could afford it?!

As Jesus followers, we are surely called to listen to the economic prophets in our time. We too must occasionally make a fuss and confront the systems and institutions that create and perpetuate poverty, in Canada and around God’s world. The ancient Hebrew prophets, and Jesus among them, had an economic model called Jubilee, that periodically overturned the economic fortunes of the poor and landless, so that they could recover their livelihood and dignity. At Trinity, we have our Jubilee Foundation, to help us take part in the realization of Jesus’ Kingdom economy. Fittingly, at this time, our efforts will ensure something better than a free market, for profit water system in one community. We will be taking part in the not-for-profit building of a fair flow economy in one African village.

The waters of life will rise from a Jubilee well in a schoolyard. It will be a place where anyone can drink at the well. May we all meet Jesus by that well, offering our thirsty prophet what he offers us - the cup that refreshes.