



7th March 2021
The 3rd Sunday of Lent
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Lucy Winkett

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most famous characters in world history. But it's hard to get to what kind of personality he had, not least because of the way we read the Bible often, or the way his name is packed around with liturgical prayers or repetitions. Lent is an opportunity to de-familiarise ourselves with some of this if you are a regular church person: make the stories strange again, hear them as if for the first time. So let's try to listen to this story as if for the first time; because if there is a story in the gospels that reveals something of the personality or the character of Jesus of Nazareth, then perhaps this is it.

First, there's a kind of comic book version of his character that's in a way easier to absorb. But then there is what I want to call a more grown-up version which is much, much more challenging.

The comic book version is that Jesus, meek and mild, kind teacher, turns up to church and to his surprise and irritation finds inside the church people selling things. He gets angry very quickly, and things take a bad turn. He becomes violent – if only to furniture rather than people – and starts throwing the tables around, letting the livestock out of their cages and knocking over the float. *You can't sell stuff in church* he says. *Church is pure. Don't dirty it with murky money.*

This comic book version touches a deep nerve that has produced many arguments in church congregations ever since. Can we sell Christmas cards inside the church? What about Traidcraft? Should we put a cloth over any of the produce while the service is going on so that the prayers stay pure? And more seriously, if a church building has an outside space – like we have here at St James's in central London – a courtyard even – what about having a coffee truck there, or a stall selling food or a stall selling souvenirs? Churches, cathedrals across Europe often have market stalls next to them on their ground. Independent small businesses. Until very recently that was the case here. Good questions can get asked even from this comic book version of the story: What is the right relationship between church life and commerce?

But for me, this has always felt like a false opposition and a set up argument.

Because a closer reading of the gospel story reveals something different from the comic book version. The point Jesus is making is much stronger, much more challenging than saying you shouldn't sell stuff in or near a church.

If we put it in context, and read it more closely, listen harder, what is this gospel saying?

Jesus of Nazareth has been to the Temple many times in Jerusalem – you remember we know he was there when he was 12 – for 3 days – and he will have been many

times since. He's not surprised. He knows the layers of courtyards that are there. He knows full well what happens there day after day. This is a whole economic system he's observed over years. He chooses to go there on this particular day and make his case with a vivid unforgettable high stakes action.

What are those people doing there? They are not just selling stuff; they're changing money. They are changing Greek and Roman money into Jewish or Tyrian coins – to pay the Temple tax. And they're selling doves and livestock specifically for sacrifices required by religion.

The words used to describe Jesus's actions are incredibly energetic. They're not at all polite – but have loads of energy, like a sportsperson, accelerating down the pitch.

Emotionally, perhaps physically too, Jesus is sprinting.

ἐξέβαλεν *exeballein* – he threw out /drove out the sheep and oxen

ἐξέχεεν *execheen* – he poured out all the coins

ἀνέτρεψεν *anetrepsein* - he turned over – highly energetic – can also mean to destroy.

And his friends see something in him they recognise: Zeal. Tireless, focussed energy, passion, clarity.

Zeal.

And it's the quote from the psalms that the disciples remember as they watch him – *Zeal for your house will consume me* (Psalm 69 v 9)

Zeal is an old-fashioned word, not an every day one. And in today's society gets a bad press often for good reason. If you or I have any part of us that gets zealous, we can learn to unleash it for the good – but

we have to learn to moderate it when its merciless energy gets misdirected – as it can so often sometimes towards ourselves or towards others in an unfettered judgemental focus on what is wrong.

The people that Jesus drove out were money changers. Contemporary witness speaks of the exploitation that this changing of money often carried. Unfair rates of exchange, exploitation of those who were poorer as they tried to buy doves for the sacrifices they were required to make, after childbirth for example.

Other contemporary sources cite the arguments that were happening within the religious establishment and the confrontations that took place when injustices were uncovered.

Jesus knew full well the economic injustices meted out in the Temple as in society. He was familiar with the inequity and the burden that was carried by those who were least resilient. He chose his moment, and he deliberately took provocative symbolic action that would cause headlines and would challenge the religious establishment as strongly as he had challenged the political establishment by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey not a horse. Jesus of Nazareth knew the power of symbolic action.

It is not the trade itself that he is objecting to; it's the exploitation practices, the unfair exchange rates, the insistence on buying animals for sacrifice even when the poor could not afford it. This is an eruption of energy that is challenging, overturning the unfairness and exploitation of the economic system that was being supported by the religious establishment of the day.

Jesus of Nazareth is a genius story teller, playwright, and makes brilliant use of

symbolic action. Riding into town on a donkey, grabbing a mustard seed from a nearby tree, writing in the sand as a mob bays for the blood of a woman in front of him, and here overturning tables of money-changers exploiting the poor, Jesus knew the power of symbols as much as he understood the influence of parables. Like Mahatma Gandhi and the salt marches, like Rosa Parkes who sat down, like Pope Francis who prayed both at the Western Wall in Jerusalem but also at the Security Wall in Bethlehem, with all who have ever taken the knee or lifted their hands in prayer, or waved a rainbow flag or offered a flower to a soldier, symbolic action matters.

For us as Christians, it matters what we do with our bodies because it mattered what God did with God's body in Jesus. The power of action taken physically, to point to a deeper spiritual truth runs through the whole imaginative, vivifying ministry of Jesus, poetic teacher, elusive preacher, energetic prophet. The Jesus of the gospels has never struck me as Jesus meek and mild; here, as elsewhere this is Jesus urgent and awkward.

The power of symbolic action, if it is imaginative action placed at the service of hope and justice, is clear. It is emotive, provocative, disruptive, good.

But a symbolic action can also be a place to hide from real change – and this is its danger.

We have a real example right now happening as we are emerging from the pandemic. The symbolic action has been to clap our appreciation for key workers in the NHS. But we seem incapable as a society to make the step change – the step change that is necessary for the work of cleaners, care workers, nurses, to be valued as highly as, for example, people who work in

financial services. I'm not talking so much about the difference between 1% and more percent in the current political debate this week over NHS pay; but a fundamental shift in whose work is valued by all of us culturally as well as financially.

Tomorrow is International Women's Day: women have suffered disproportionately from this pandemic in this and other countries across the world because of pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities: economically, job security, in terms of domestic violence, or with reference to peace and security.

Symbolic imaginative actions such as clapping or drawing rainbows in our windows are good: but are not enough. In the Magnificat it's clear. Mary teaches us that God *scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts*. Imagination is not enough in itself. It has to be placed at the service of the hope and justice that Christ proclaims. Only then it becomes advocacy and witness.

I have often wondered what happened the day after Jesus turned over the tables. Did they come back? I think they may have done. I think they certainly went back after he died.

The integrity that Christ calls us to means that symbolic action that provokes debate and highlights injustice is matched by the change-making that we find harder to sustain. Christ followed through: went to the cross, and so his provocative imaginative action, like this table turning, is always seen with the shadow of the cross falling over it; pointing to a deeper truth and an enduring vision of a more just future.

In his imaginative provocative action, Jesus reminds us that if we are not upside down, we are not the right way up.

And I want to say a little about St James's Piccadilly this church for a moment. Last week, we talked together about the new vision that we are following as we emerge together through this pandemic. For our own income generation and expenditure to be ever more closely aligned with our vision, mission and values. For this physical and now digital space to be a welcoming, prophetic, sustained and sustainable presence in the city, it's not enough to be involved in provocative imaginative action like this. We have to pay attention to the infrastructure, the spreadsheets and the payroll, the legislation to which we are accountable, the policies and procedures that keep the most vulnerable among us safe.

This takes commitment from everyone – including financial commitment – from everyone who cares about this church, what it stands for, what it could be, how it must change. We are trying together to be wise. But as Paul says in one of his most inspiring letters; we preach Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God. Which is foolishness to a culture that will, like the money changers, like any of us who are working, saving, spending in the world, operate within exploitative parameters.

One thing I have learned, am still learning in this covid time is that my heart becomes more resilient and faithful if I am practising foolishness, and I've noticed it in others too. I don't mean by that an irresponsibility, or, given that this church employs people and has tenants - thoughtless risk taking with someone else's future - but foolishness. The practise of foolishness deepens trust – because it means you are

admitting that it's not altogether clear what you should do next. Trust is all we have when what we relied on before has gone. For us, this has taken the form of resisting the temptation to preserve for its own sake, loosening our grip on what we thought was important before, holding a huge consultation exercise about our values and taking ourselves into new areas of work and mission, praying for a spirit of faithful adventure, of trustful foolishness. While taking the spreadsheets as seriously as anyone has to who runs their own business or is economically active in the world.

And so as we listen to this gospel today, it's not enough for us to harness our imaginations and be gleeful about Jesus's rampage, and then use it in the service of what we already think about money or society or church.

We are asked not just to follow through the temple courtyard with Jesus as he energetically turns over the tables of other people's exploitative practices. We have to let this gospel challenge us personally. And ask ourselves as individuals and as a church....

What tables are you sitting at that Jesus would overturn?

You may be at boardroom tables, canteen tables, at desks or counters or gathering places. You may be gathered in your work, in your social life, in your family, in your church, at tables - that are not so much physical but are places you draw people into conversation or places where money is exchanged.

The tables of the money changers were used to count money exploited from the poorest in society. Their tables were used to provide a barrier between customer and exchange, were used to place the cages full

of doves and pigeons sold at too high a price to people who had been taught to buy them to fulfil their religious obligations.

In the church we talk about the altar, the table, being a place of welcome for all. What if this table is one that Jesus would overturn if he could?

How can the church witness to this foolish zeal for justice in a world and society that seems so immutably addicted to exploitation – of the earth, of one another, of anyone who has less power or voice than we think we have?

As soon as we take a close look at the exploitative systems we are all part of, we realise we are lost. Because if we're honest, we're part of exploitative practices at every turn. All of us.

But at this table, at this altar, if we listen to this gospel, we will be willing always for it to be overturned, for our assumptions and addictions to be challenged. If we are willing to be upended, the church can witness, point away from itself, point towards a just and beautiful future which is fuelled by the holy rage of Christ.

That's why the energy of the gospel has the potential to save us even today from the dangers we constantly fall into: when we reduce spirituality to a collection of warm feelings, or when we allow the institutional drag of money and buildings to suffocate our energy, vocation and mission.

In these pandemic and divided days, if anywhere there is a place to talk about sickness, death, fear and injustice in a way that bears witness to the possibility of healing then it can be in the public sacred space of the church around a table always at the point of being turned upside down.

What tables do you sit at that Jesus would turn over if he could?

If you know them, maybe it's time to walk away.

If you don't know yet, then we can pray together - to become more foolish this season of Lent. Because true foolishness requires trust in God. And for us, while it may seem alarming in some ways, it is not clear what will happen next. It's not an easy place to be, but it's a creative and faithful place to be.

The gospel isn't in itself always counter cultural. But if we spend time really getting under the skin of a story like Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple, if we ask for the willingness to be upended ourselves, or to challenge the injustice and exploitation we see, then we will let go of the comic book figure who won't let us buy stuff or sell stuff in church.

Instead, we will find a redeemed rage within us that is much, much more challenging to the way we live.

Let us pray

Holy God, help us to know how to rage with you. Give us energy and grace as we begin to emerge from the pandemic days we have known. Help us to see the tables we sit at: which ones to invite others to and which ones you will want to overturn. And help us face the challenge of foolishness for your sake. Amen.