

Turning over the tables; John 2. 13-22

Cheekily, and with a smile I sometimes say to the PCC 'well turning over the tables is always an option'. The passage that we have read today is one we often sight as an example of righteous justice. It almost gives the ok to lose it sometimes, if it's for the right reason, because the Lord did. And we have that impression, of the Lord losing his temper in the middle of verse 17 where we read "zeal for your house will consume me". To be consumed by a feeling is to be overwhelmed by it and if that feeling is anger then it's not difficult to go one step further and imagine the emotion to spill over into an action of destruction.

And although I sometimes jokingly say 'turning over a few tables is an option', I don't actually believe it is.

There are many passages of scripture that we grapple with, a bit like Jacob grappling with God all night, and it's these texts that can also leave us a bit wounded as we go on our way, limping but like Jacob blessed as well. The element of this text that I grapple with is the image of Jesus losing his temper, because it is such an alien concept for the Prince of Peace, for Jesus to lose his temper and trash the place. It's an image of a tantrum, and on the whole it's really only small children and those who haven't learnt to control their temper, who have tantrums. Now I'm not saying that there aren't moments when we are tired and at the end of our tether when any one of us can find ourselves in that position of lose our temper, as a mother of three small boys I can tell you that I've had my moments. In those moments when Jesus is tired and at the end of his tether his character is to show love and compassion. In the desert, he doesn't give in to temptation, or crash about saying 'it's not fair', when facing Pilot he doesn't resort to threats of violence or shouting, on the cross in so much pain he forgives and shows love and compassion for those around him.

So why does he in this passage, seem to lose his temper and through the place into chaos. Being destructive rather than constructive. This goes against everything I understand to be of God.

God is love, God is creative, God brings order to chaos. So why? This is the question that I grapple with.

Critically I have to ask myself if I am simply uncomfortable with the image of Jesus losing his temper because to me that sort of behaviour is unbecoming and yes, that's quite true.

I have to ask is this a consequence of my own background and upbringing and the need to be in control part of my own embedded behaviour and the answer to that is most certainly yes.

Do I think this is also a projection of our human behaviour onto Jesus, if we were faced with a similar situation, something that made our blood boil, a social injustice, a situation of enormous inequality and unfairness, wouldn't we too feel like this and want to shake things up. Yes, we would and indeed we do.

We human beings, especially like to use our power, money and authority to force a change. And sadly there are times when we have tried every way possible to find a peaceful solution to a situation but to no avail and the only option is to step in and turn over a few tables. But it is always a destructive route. And we are still left with the questions after; has it worked? was it justified? And of course we far more often project our humanity onto Jesus rather than try to reflect his divinity.

But I can't help comparing what Jesus does when he is under pressure, which is to stay calm, and stick to the plan of witnessing to God's unfailing love, with this act of apparent loss of control and be surprised by it.

And yet, I am also reminded as I read about the tables going over and coins spilled out, and cattle everywhere, that life is messy and God is always found amidst the messiness of life. The birth of Christ was messy, Mary and Joseph unmarried, and away from home, times were difficult. Throughout his life Jesus was found in messy situations, regular disputes with those in authority, even his own family thought he was out of his right mind at times, his actions were questioned and he regularly took his disciples out of their comfort zones to challenge their thinking. The cross was found outside the city on a rubbish heap. All is chaotic and very messy but Jesus brings a sense of calm.

Turning over the tables is chaotic and it is messy and you could say for a change Jesus has created that mess but had he? The mess already existed, the people had forgotten what the temple was about, it was there to create a space to meet with God, to pray to be healed and refreshed, to give thanks. But it had become yet another vehicle to tax and deprive people through greed. A way to keep the haves and the have nots; the poor, the sick, the crippled out and the haves in. Jesus simply emptied the temple of those who were not there to pray, to give thanks and be refreshed and healed by God. By driving out the cattle and sheep the herdsmen would have had to follow them. By emptying out the coins and turning over the tables the people would have had to get on their knees to clear it all up. The animals and people would have left and the mess would have to be cleared up. The temple space restored to a place of order, peace and prayer. Jesus did this in the most effect way ..

I suppose after grappling with this text I could draw the conclusion that sometimes you have to draw attention to the mess for people to see it. And once the mess and the chaos have been noticed only then can the place be tidied up and order restored. And that I can understand. So maybe turning over the tables is an option after all, but gently and definitely not often.

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