

Sermon for Lent 3B

The Text: John 2:13-22

According to the Oxford English Dictionary “to turn the tables” on someone means that you “have caused a complete reversal of the state of affairs”, especially by “turning a position of disadvantage into one of your favour.”

John tells us that there was a fair bit of table-turning that day when the Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. There in the Temple courts people were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers were sitting at their tables. At face value this was a helpful service for those travelling to worship at Jerusalem from afar, as visitors would have found it extremely difficult to bring with them the animals prescribed by the sacrificial system. So here they are at the temple, available for purchase, and for added convenience money-changers were on hand to convert foreign currency into the required local legal tender.

But how quickly the tables are turned—literally. John tells us that Jesus made a whip out of cords, and drove out of the Temple courts all the sheep and oxen, and he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. What’s behind this sudden outburst?

In the other Gospel accounts Jesus says: “It is written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” It would seem that the animal retailers and money changers were dealing unethically and practicing extortion, grasping the opportunity for excessive profit from people in a vulnerable situation—the people needed a sacrifice...so they can pay for the convenience.

But as evil as this is, it isn’t included by John, who focuses on a far greater problem, and Jesus’ words: “Take away these things from *this place*.” For Jesus, and for John, this whole episode is about location. It is about space and what is supposed to be happening in this space, and what’s not. This is the Temple. According to the first book of Kings, chapter 8, this is the place where God located himself on earth:

“When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service

because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple" (vv10-11).

Solomon then prays:

"Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive" (vv28b-30).

Jesus was angry because the Temple is a sacred space, a place where the divine promised to be present with his favour and grace and blessing and forgiveness. It was a sacred space for God to be doing his work, not a sacred space in which to do worldly business as if it were a shopping mall or a bank. By opening up this convenience store right there the people showed where their hearts really were before God. The thought of the great entrepreneurial possibilities before them had crowded out God in their hearts. They had forgotten God; open for business but closed to him. The clinking of the coins made sweet music in their ears which drowned out the singing of the Psalms. There are enough places, are there not, for buying and selling without invading the place that has been dedicated to God? The issue isn't only unfair prices, it is that they are there at all. It is a desecration of holiness. And so Jesus says "Do not make my Father's house a marketplace!"

The thing of significance to note here is that whereas the writers of the other three Gospel accounts record Jesus saying "my house", the emphasis that John brings in Jesus' rebuke is the name 'Father'. Do not make my *Father's* house a marketplace!" Those words that Jesus speaks cause the disciples to remember what has been written in the Psalms: "Zeal for your house (the 'your' is referring to God) will consume me." John is wanting to make the connection quite clear for his Jewish audience: the 'your house' (God's house) of Psalm 69 is Jesus' Father's house. By referring to the Temple as 'my Father's house' Jesus is proclaiming his own identity. He is more than just a prophet; he is the Son of the Father who shares the same divine nature as the Father and was with the Father from all eternity. The One who has driven out the oxen and sheep and doves and overturned the tables and scattered the

coins is the Son of God. He is the Christ who the Father has sent to be the Redeemer of Israel and of the whole world.

So it's easy to see the irony of the question the Jews ask Jesus: "What sign will you show to us to prove you have the authority to do these things?" In our second reading we hear Paul say "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom". Well here is both! Jesus' disciples had recognised that Psalm 69 had been fulfilled in what Jesus did. But the Jews hadn't. They were looking, waiting, watching for a sign. They needed to watch with their ears instead of with their eyes, and listen to the word, for here in their very presence is their God and Saviour right with them; the fullness of God's grace and truth! They want a sign? How about this, Jesus says: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it."

They think he's talking about the Temple structure towering around them. They protest: "It's taken forty-six years to build this"—and according to the Jewish historian Josephus, some 18,000 men to do it at that. But the temple Jesus spoke of was his body. He was teaching them that he is the new location of God's presence to hear confessions and forgive sins. As Paul says in Colossians 1: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the Cross" (vv19-20).

Today's text is a masterful work by John. The Holy Spirit really was at work through him. The words used are so intentional, so deliberately sowed there in order to point ahead to Jesus making peace between us and God through his shed blood on the Cross. The mention of the Passover itself points us to Maundy Thursday and the night when Jesus was betrayed. The whip by which Jesus drove out the animals reminds us of how he was whipped. The word John uses for 'scatter', when Jesus scattered the coins of the money-changers, is literally 'poured out'—pointing ahead to when the Son of God would pour out his own blood on the Cross. When Jesus says "take away these things" the original Greek word used can also mean to 'bear', 'carry', 'raise up' and 'kill'—all of which have a connection with Jesus as he bore the sins of the world, carried his own cross and was raised up on it, and crucified.

That day that Jesus turned the tables in the Temple Courts he was telling them that God was about to turn the tables on sin, death and the kingdom of Satan, everywhere he goes in the Person of Christ, freeing the oppressed,

blessing sinners and tax collectors by eating with them, releasing weak people from the power of the devil and delivering them from evil, showing divine help and favour to those most vulnerable and unable to help themselves, proclaiming Good News in the synagogue and bringing forgiveness and peace and help to all he would go to. And then he will turn the tables on sin, death and the kingdom of Satan, not just for those who can make it to Jerusalem, but for the whole world, once for all people of all times. He will do that by being whipped himself, bearing the Cross, carrying it to Golgotha and being lifted up, where he would pour out his blood; God making himself the sacrifice; bearing the sin of the world and bleeding for it, so that whoever believes in Christ and trusts in his precious blood can stand in the presence of God and receive his peace. And then, even harder than rebuilding a stone Temple that took 46 years and 18,000 men to build, he will rise from the dead just three days later, bringing new life out of death for the world.

In this season of Lent, God's word gives us the opportunity to reflect that none of us are able to turn the tables and reverse our situation between God and ourselves. In our natural sinful condition our hearts and minds are darkened and spiritually dead so that, just like the Jews, we cannot recognise or know Jesus as God's presence on earth with the saving help we need. It's a time to re-assess our priorities and the space we make for God in our life.

But it's also a time to re-assess our priorities and the space we make for God in our life because the Father turned the tables for you and made space for you to share in his life. He sent Christ to exchange places with us on the Cross that we might become the righteousness of God, and to bring this saving work for the world to you personally, in baptism, so that you share in his own death and resurrection, and he is wherever you are and wherever you are he is, and you have access to his same saving help that he gave to all those in the gospels. Through Christ your Heavenly Father sends you his Holy Spirit to work faith in you and give you a new heart dead to sin and alive to Christ, making you holy by being filled with his own holiness as he dwells in you. So no matter what each day brings for you, the Temple of God is near to you here in the Divine Service as the Holy Spirit leads us to believe, like the disciples in our text, the words which Jesus had spoken, and continues to speak to you today: "Peace be with you—your sins are forgiven." Amen.