

Third Sunday in Lent Year B 2021

Exodus 20, I Corinthians 1, John 2

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The humanity of Jesus both is, and is not, a very simple idea. It is a simple idea because we know what human beings are – they are people. Nothing is more familiar to us than the idea of ourselves, and in this sense the humanity of Jesus means something simple because it just means that Jesus was a human being exactly as you and I are human beings. He wasn't a pretend human being who was actually God in disguise, he wasn't a partial human being who needed God to complete him. He was fully a human being.

But if we say that Jesus's humanity is not something very simple, we are not just being difficult. It is an oddity to say that this human being is also divine. It is not, we should note, a contradiction – divinity and humanity are not contradictory things like apples and

oranges or circles and squares. To say that Jesus is both human and divine is to say that it makes sense to speak of Jesus the way we speak of God, and also that it makes sense to speak of Jesus the way we speak of each other.

The incarnation is, however, a challenge to our ideas about God. We have a strong tendency to want to protect God from humanity in all its dirt and greed and mess. Hence the way in which we sanitise the stories of Jesus's birth in our nativity plays, for example. This morning's gospel confronts us with something else we find uncomfortable. Jesus, in all his human glory, shows his anger at the wrongs of his world. An angry Christ is an awkward Christ, one we'd rather not think about. Gentle Jesus meek and mild is far less threatening.

At the heart of the fourth gospel is the sense that there is so much more going on than we are at first able to

perceive or understand. What we see is part of what is happening, but what is happening is so much more than what see. This is, in a sense, the essence of incarnational Christianity. God embraces the world, he does not contradict. Christianity is not either / or so much as both /and. To paraphrase St Athanasius, God becomes human so that humanity may become divine.

This both / and aspect underlies what we at first find a rather jarring gospel story. Jesus enters the temple, and drives out those who would use the house of God as a place of financial exploitation. His opponents, outraged at what they see as sacrilegious behaviour, demand a sign, a miracle, to justify the action. They seek a demonstrable proof of Jesus' identity, or rather they think they do, in order to accept the revolution he brings. Jesus answers them with a deliberate puzzle: destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Predictably, his uncomprehending enemies do not understand. What a daft thing to say, they think. This temple took forty-six years to build. But now the

evangelist opens our eyes. He was speaking of the temple of his body. And, we are told, when he was raised from the dead, only then did his disciples remember.

What his interlocuters miss, is the double sense with which Jesus speaks. The narrator tells us this explicitly – he was speaking of the temple of his body. But the text tells us also, because at the beginning of the narrative we are introduced to the temple with one particular, standard Greek word – *ieron*, a temple of stone, a building for priests – but when Jesus speaks of destruction he uses a different word – *naos*, sanctuary, the place of divine presence. Now one can overdo these sorts of contrasts – language is fluid, and we often use more than one word to refer to the same thing in a single conversation. But given the fourth gospel's obsession with double meanings, we need at least to pay some close attention. And if we do, we will realise that the riddle with which Jesus mocks his opponents is itself a sign with a double sense: that

which Jesus' hearers get wrong, they also get right, because the lack of comprehension in the moment will later be replaced by the new world order which is his resurrection from the dead. This ignorance before and apprehension after is in fact the divine plan. To fail to understand is just one stage of understanding, because the new life of the baptised will be a life which has died before it can be raised. The authorities both do not and do understand, because they fulfil the prophecy by destroying the sanctuary which is Jesus' body, in order that it may be raised in three days.

This gives us, perhaps, an approach to our own discomfort when we are confronted with the anger of Jesus. Rather than wish away those aspects of Jesus humanity which we find inconvenient, we need to embrace our bewilderment, to learn from our own misapprehension. To understand Jesus' teaching will always also be not to understand, because contradiction, the crossing of two opposing things, is the essence of Christian faith. This is not to buy into

an irrational free for all in which nothing makes sense and so we can say what we like. It is to acknowledge the truth already encountered, that Christian teaching is not “either or” but rather “both, and”.

The ten commandments which constituted our first reading are still basic to Christian living, even though the law of which they form a part has been brought to completion in Christ. They both are, and are not, an ultimate expression of the divine will. With the same double intent, we as Christians cling to the cross, because that cross – that contradiction of life and death, that joining together of heaven and earth, of created and uncreated, of temporal and eternal – is the basis from which all Christian thought and prayer proceeds.

The contradiction which the cross of Christ must bring is the confounding of worldly strength and wisdom, according to St Paul. Jews demand signs, and Greeks

seek for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block or a scandal for Jews, and folly to Greeks. But the foolishness of God is wiser than humanity. When we encounter Jesus we encounter the dismantling of our own spiritual and intellectual securities, we encounter the challenge that draws us further towards the reality of God's presence in the world.

That presence is manifest in love, but love can be manifest in anger: anger at injustice, anger at hatred, anger at the idolatry of self which is so central to our lazy presuppositions. The temple should be, and is, the place of the divine presence. But that presence, newly incarnated in Jesus Christ, now flows out into the entire world. It is not just one building which Jesus cleanses, not just one place which he rids of exploitation and injustice. The world in all its fullness is the place of divine redemption. And the anger of God's all consuming love is the miracle which transforms every single one of us.