

14 March, 2009  
Ex 20:1-17; Ps 19  
I Cor 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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This week's headlines have been gratifying, to say the least. Bernie Madoff arriving at court. Bernie Madoff pleading guilty. Bernie Madoff heading to jail. After almost a year of bad economic news, peppered with stories of deceitful balance sheets, unethical mortgage products, panicked investors, and ordinary bad judgments, it looks as if, finally, one of the money-changers has been expelled from the Temple. After all, this was surely, by his own admission, one who had taken an honest market and made it a den of thieves!

But is this really what was happening in today's Gospel reading? Was Jesus really flogging businessmen for being unethical? Or was he angry about something else entirely? Yes, anyone who has traveled abroad knows that when you approach the tables of the money-changers, you approach in fear and trembling. Once you sit in that chair, exchange rates shift, commissions get charged, taxes you've never heard of suddenly appear, and soon your nice big pile of money has been reduced to a stack of bills so small that it resembles your retirement account! And most scholars will tell you that the money-changers in the Temple were no better. They were notorious for taking an exorbitant commission, but they were also performing a necessary service for the religious life of Israel. The laws which governed the sacred practices of first-century Judaism commanded that Jews sacrifice animals to celebrate the arrival of a first-born son, and for major religious festivals, and also that they had to offer up every first-born male animal from their herds. This was easy enough for people who lived in or near Jerusalem; they could bring their sheep or their oxen to the Temple and offer them up. But for people who lived far away, it was more difficult. Either they had to lead their own livestock along miles of treacherous roads, or they needed to procure livestock in Jerusalem. And so businessmen began to facilitate an exchange, in which people from far away could bring money instead of animals, exchange their money for the correct currency, buy some livestock, and make the required sacrifice. They were providing a necessary service. So, why would Jesus be upset that they were doing business in the Temple?

There is a danger, I think, in allowing the worlds of faith and of commerce to mingle. When I was in Turkey last year, every ancient site had its array of vendors peddling souvenir statues. One stall, in particular, was illuminating. There, on one table, were miniature replicas of Artemis of the Ephesians, the Egyptian gods Anubis and Horus, figurines of the Buddha, even miniature groupings depicting the Last Supper and the crucified Christ. It was an equal-opportunity idol-vendor! The implication was clear enough: as soon as one god was for sale, they all were. From the point of a businessperson trying to turn earn money from people's faith, it didn't matter which faith they held. One was as good as another, for the god being served in that stall was neither Artemis nor Christ, but Profit.

And so, perhaps, when Jesus cries out, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:16) he means what he said. The money-changers here are not just dishonorable rogues who overcharge the faithful, but those who confuse the things which can be bought and sold with those that are beyond price. Once money is allowed into the house of worship, it is dangerously easy to start to worship money and the things it can buy. Once the Law allows people with different resources to sacrifice different animals (cows for the wealthy, doves for the poor, sheep for those in

between) (Lev 5:7<sup>1</sup>), it is easy to judge people by what they offer, treating the rich with obsequious deference, while thrusting the poor to the edge of the crowd or the back of the line. Once you start offering sacrifices to God, is it all too easy to slip into thinking that your sacrifices can buy God.

Christ talked about money more than he spoke about anything else, but his teachings are contrarian and weird. On the one hand, he urges us to be generous in assisting one another. On the other, he acts as if money has no value at all. Questioned about paying taxes, Christ points out that if the image on the coin is Caesar's, to Caesar it should go. It is a child's answer, ignoring the value of the money and focusing instead on what it looks like. When he hands out blessings, he blesses the poor. Approached by a rich man, he commands him to sell everything and join the disciples. Watching people make offerings to the Temple, he ignores the bountiful gifts of the rich, which, after all, kept the place going, and honors instead a poor widow who dropped in one small copper coin. It is as if, for Christ, money has no intrinsic value; the only thing that matters is the ways in which it can be given away out of love.

"You can't take it with you," we often say, but Jesus *means it*. Over and over, he diverts our attention from things which do not last towards things which are eternal. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," he teaches, "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where [Madoffs] do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:19-21) Jesus is not interested in the coin, but in the heart.

This is a hard Gospel. It challenges us in our everyday lives, in our basic priorities. Common sense tells us that we need money to live; it is not unnecessary. Just try asking the homeless men who slept in our auditorium this week what it's like to try to live without money; it's not pretty! And yet, Christ urges us to look toward what will endure. Not the Temple, with its large stones. (Matt 24:2) Not the sacrifices. Not the paraphernalia of ritual, the catalogs of icons, prayer flags, and incense. Not even towers of glass and steel which touch the sky. Instead, he points his listeners away from all that seems most permanent, towards his own frail body. Human beings, your neighbors, are the only things you see each day that are immortal. (See, for example, C.S.Lewis, "The Weight of Glory."<sup>2</sup>) This world and all that is in it will pass away, but destroy these bodies, and God "will raise [them] up." (John 2:19)

The children of God have infinite value, for God himself has died to give it us. Every single one of us has been placed into a balance against the life of the Son of God, and God himself has weighed us worth the cost. Foolish, you say? Of course. St. Paul reminds us, "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (I Cor 1:18, 25) It is the foolishness of a miser who hoards, not coins, but people, the weakness of a love which refuses to be less than eternal. Like Orpheus descending to the dead to rescue Eurydice, Christ entered the gates of Hades to bring us out, and he did not look back.

But if the children of God have infinite value, then each child of God has infinite value. Perhaps this is why Christ so relentlessly draws our attention to the poor, the sick, the outcast -- all those we would overlook. In the human world, they are counted as nothing, worthless, but in God's

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<sup>1</sup> The intention, of course, was to be merciful by allowing each person or family to participate in the sacrifices by providing animals which they could afford. *People* might judge one another on the basis of the sacrifice, but in the eyes of God, there would only be a problem if families which could afford to offer a large animal chose to offer a small one instead, demonstrating that they were not, in fact, grateful to God for the abundance they enjoyed.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis writes, "When all the suns and nebulas have passed away, each one of you will still be alive... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talkd to a mere mortal."

world, they are worth everything. In looking toward them, we begin to transcend our merely human values, and learn to see with the eyes of God.

I read, a few weeks ago, an account of a woman named Angela, a woman who was born deaf. One morning, she came rushing down to a hearing friend in great excitement, and said she had dreamed she was in heaven. She got to look all around, and spent some time talking with Jesus. "Jesus was everything I had hoped he would be," she exclaimed, "and his signing was amazing!"<sup>3</sup> The friend was taken aback. When he imagined heaven, he imagined a world in which disabled people were healed of their bodily and mental limitations, made "whole" as he was whole. But when Angela dreamed of heaven, she dreamed of a place in which people like herself would be valued as they were, in which the rest of us would be healed of our indifference, in which everyone would care enough to learn to communicate with people like her. She dreamed that we would all be healed, not of our bodily limitations, but of our spiritual ones, and set free to love as God himself has loved us.

That is the aim of the life of faith, my friends. It is the work we do in Lent, but not only in Lent. It is the challenge which awaits us each day of our lives. Every other thing in our lives -- our money, our homes, our clothing, our work, our relationships -- has value in the eyes of God only so far as it helps us learn that love. We can cling to them for themselves, and we will be shattered when they fail us or are taken away. Or we can use them in the service of others, keeping our neighbor's good as our aim, and they will become a ladder which stretches from earth to heaven, a ladder shaped like the cross of Christ, on which we will learn to be shaped like God's Son. After all, "faith, hope, love, endure -- these three -- but the greatest of these is love." (I Cor 13:13)

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<sup>3</sup> Told by John Swinton in the Introduction to Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*.