

St Georges Church Morpeth Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016 *Mark chapter 11 verses 11-19*

I went along to All Saints' school last Tuesday to do a school assembly. I wonder how long the children will remember what I said. When I was at primary school, the local vicar would come at least once a month and tell us stories about Jesus. He said that Jesus showed us the right way of doing things. He never told the story about Jesus turning over the tables, but I had heard it at Sunday school and often thought about when asked to move the school dinner tables. Like the visiting vicar I have never told this story to primary school children.

Jesus could be described variously as 'aggressive', 'angry' and 'courageous'. But there is one thing that Jesus definitely wasn't: surprised. Economic activity was a normal part of the Temple's function. The Temple was not just a religious centre but a political and economic one. The Roman occupiers tolerated the Temple's existence as long as the High Priest and his colleagues encouraged loyalty to the Roman Empire. Prayers for the emperor were offered in the Temple every day. The annual Temple tax was paid in a currency not used in everyday life. So in the run-up to Passover every year, money-changers set up stalls in the Temple forecourt. If visitors to the Temple wanted to make sacrifices to seek forgiveness for sins, they could buy the animals on offer. Doves were the cheapest acceptable sacrifice. Some Jews supported this system, others did not.

Jesus was far from being the only Jew to have a problem with the Temple's leadership and the way it was run. The Temple's leaders were often accused of being corrupt and resented for their loyalty to the Roman Empire. According to Josephus, a historian who lived in the first century, Roman troops were often stationed near the Temple at Passover time, as the authorities were particularly nervous of rebellion. A protest against trade at the Temple would be a protest against the very nature of the Temple itself. When Jesus spoke of a 'hideout for thieves', he was quoting Jeremiah. Centuries earlier, Jeremiah had used the word 'thieves' to describe those in charge at the Temple. He said that they 'exploit the stranger, the orphan and the widow' and 'shed innocent blood' but expect to be safe from God's anger because they worship in the Temple. According to Morna Hooker, it is the priests, not the money-changers and pigeon-sellers, who are the 'thieves'. She suggests that Jesus saw much of the worship offered in the Temple as a sham —hence he sought to prevent sacrifices by throwing out those buying and selling. Was Jesus protesting against economic exploitation? Is this taking us back to the idea that he was objecting to commerce in a religious building? He may have opposed the excessive rates charged by the traders and money-changers.

What if Jesus was objecting not just to prices but to the whole system? -Some believe that Jesus was outraged that such people were pressurised to spend their limited money before they could engage in worship. Biblical scholar Ched Myers believes that Jesus was not opposing only the Jewish establishment but the Roman authorities behind it. Keith Hebden argues that Jesus was resisting all forms of oppression, standing not just against one temple or empire but against the world's 'domination system'. Why did Jesus choose this form of protest? Does it seem consistent with the impression we usually have of Jesus. Previously he had relied on words. Now he puts his hands to use to overturn tables and scatter coins. According to Mark, Jesus had looked round the Temple the evening before and left when it was late. This suggests a reconnaissance to plan the action for the following day. The idea that Jesus would not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple would be bizarre if he acted alone while his disciples watched. The Temple was far too big for that. If his followers joined in — lots of them, not just the 'Twelve' — they may have blockaded the entrances.

If we consider these points, Jesus' action looks less like a spontaneous outburst of anger and appears instead as a well-planned protest. A small group of unarmed people were unlikely to hold off the Temple authorities, let alone the Roman troops that could be sent to back them up. It seems that Jesus and his comrades left the Temple that evening, having maintained their protest for less than a day. The traders would have gathered up their scattered coins, the entrances opened again and the Temple's business gone back to normal. Jesus may not have even managed this much. Eduard Schweizer insists, 'It would have been almost impossible for Jesus to have cleared the vast Temple court — especially to have done so without causing the intervention of the Jewish

Temple police or of the Roman military stationed nearby. He suggests that, 'It is more likely that Jesus, in a symbolic way, cleared only a limited area of the Temple court: Whether it was the whole Temple or only part of it, the purpose of the protest seems to have been as much about symbolism as anything else.

What about protests in our own society against nuclear weapons, the arms trade, fossil fuels or open casting. People who block an arms factory may disrupt its activities for a few hours or a few days. They may well feel that delaying its work is worthwhile in itself, even for such a short period. This, however, is not usually the only reason for such protests. They often have a symbolic value and can gain publicity for the cause. As a leader of the nonviolent movement for Indian independence, Mohandas Gandhi made repeated and effective use of symbolic, headline-grabbing actions. Criticising the British Empire's monopoly on salt production, he led a peaceful march to the sea. In full view of film cameras, he scooped up salt from the water and encouraged people to begin manufacturing and selling salt without permission from the authorities. This was unlikely to have made much financial impact on India's British rulers, but its symbolic value was enormous. The cameras that filmed the Salt March were not incidental to it. Gandhi knew very well how important it was to ensure that they were there. It is not only the shallow and egotistical who are concerned with publicity! It is also very relevant to those seeking to promote a cause that they believe in.

Was this what Jesus was up to? Was Jesus aiming to make a big impression in a short time? He was relatively unknown when he arrived in the city. He may have been 'the popular faith healer and teacher from the north' but in Jerusalem he was just another pilgrim. At this point Jesus realised he would have to do something dramatic to get his movement noticed. According to the gospels, it was after the Temple protest that the authorities came together to work out how to get rid of him. Many within the Temple leadership may have genuinely believed that they were keeping the people safe by preventing rebellion against Rome — and retaliation from Rome. How did Jesus come to be seen as such a threat to the Roman Empire and their puppet rulers? It seems likely that the Temple protest had something to do with it. Within days of this action, Jesus had been arrested and condemned to death.

Was Jesus violent? Pictures of Jesus' protest in the Temple often show him using a whip. The whip is mentioned only in John's Gospel, where the wording seems to suggest that he used it to drive out sheep and cattle that were on sale. The other three gospels make no mention of physical violence in the protest. Jesus may certainly have seemed aggressive, which some regard as a type of violence. Others say that violence is about physical harm. We do not know anything about Jesus' appearance as he carried out this protest. We do not know if he was red-faced and shouting, or if he calmly explained his reasons to the traders before pushing over their tables. Whether violent or not, Jesus' actions were in protest against the violence of the Roman Empire and the Temple elite.

The violence of protesters tends to attract more attention than the routine violence of unjust systems. Nowadays, the phrase 'direct action' is sometimes used as a synonym for unlawful protest. This is a rather sloppy use of the term. It refers to an action, whether legal or not, that involves preventing injustice directly, rather than asking someone else to do so for you. If you oppose the sale of weapons to dictators, you might write to the government about it. If the government continues regardless, you might decide to impede the sale of such weapons by disrupting an arms fair. Both of these are forms of activism. The latter is also direct action, because you would be trying to stop something directly, rather than calling on the authorities to do so.

In the light of Jesus' Temple protest, can anyone argue that followers of Jesus should never consider taking direct action. And what message do you expect primary school children to get out of this story. This is not Jesus meek and mild. What can we learn from this story?