

3rd SUNDAY OF LENT

Year B

Psychologists tell us, in case we are in any doubt, that aggression is part of our make-up and plays an important part in the way we relate to others. We speak openly of nations that have aggressive foreign policies, businessmen who make aggressive deals, but we are reluctant to speak about our own aggressive attitudes and behaviour.

Perhaps our reluctance to own our own aggression is because we tend to associate aggression with the destructive variety – like the thoughtless infliction of cruelty on others. But aggression can be a constructive act. The word aggression comes from the Latin word *aggredi* which means to “go forward, to approach, to move against.” Constructive aggression means taking the initiative to support what is important; it means working in a hostile environment against the power that devalues your beliefs.

A good example of constructive aggression can be seen in the effective campaign against slavery in the United States. The abolitionists were not content to just assert their values; they moved against the authorities that protected slave-trading. They risked their lives when they confronted angry mobs, but their belief was strengthened by the fierce opposition they faced. One of the leaders of the movement was William Lloyd Garrison. He wrote about the subject of slavery:

On this subject I do not wish to think, or speak or write, with moderation. No, No ! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire; but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present ! I am in earnest. I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch..... The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal.

If there had been statues in the Temple, they would probably have leapt off their pedestals when Jesus organized a riot in the Temple precincts. We need to understand that the activity happening around the Temple was not just about raffle tickets or “home grown/home made” goods. The “traders” had set up commercial practices which flew in the face of the sacred space which the Temple was supposed to reflect. In the Gospel reading Jesus recognized that the commercial practices of buying and selling in the precinct of the holy place were a barrier to people living in right relationship with God and others. He passionately intervenes to stop

what appears to have become common practice in the temple precinct and “calls out” the injustice.

In the story of today’s Gospel Jesus is openly aggressive. Words give way to actions; verbal opposition gives way to forceful defiance. Jesus moves into the arena of the chief priests to work against the power that devalues his beliefs. There is no politeness or subtlety about the scene. If Jesus is worried about being arrested for disturbing the peace, no one could guess that from his behaviour. His verbs are clearly aggressive: making a whip, driving the traders and cattle out of the Temple, knocking over tables of money. Where there was peace, he brings about total disruption; where there was business as usual, he brings unusual hostility.

By way of explanation the evangelist John tells us that Jesus’ disciples remember the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will devour me.” Jesus is consumed by zeal, by a passion that shows itself in positive aggression. The outer court of the Temple has become a market where animals can be brought for sacrifice, and where visiting pilgrims can change their money into the coinage acceptable to the Temple authorities. Jesus’ command is clear: “Take all this out of here and stop turning my Father’s house into a market.”

After Jesus clears out the temple, the holy place is reclaimed for the worship of God. But soon enough, as John tells us, the Temple will be replaced by a new sanctuary where people can meet God – in the person of the risen Jesus himself.

The portrait of Jesus in today’s Gospel is a world away from the storybook caricature of Jesus, the meek and mild figure whose harmlessness looks indistinguishable from blankness. An equal caricature is to use this passage to make Jesus into a godfather of violence, a revolutionary willing to support annihilation for the sake of the cause. Jesus did use force in the Temple; he was certainly aggressive. But he did not use force to secure a coup d’etat – he was not a nationalist leader. Nor did he use aggression to gain power for himself – his kingdom could not be established by violence.

Jesus’ aggression was at the service of his Father’s house, for the advancement of the kingdom of God. The casualties of his aggression turned out to be displaced traders and cattle. Not dead people.

Our Lenten focus this week is on 12 year old Bayan and her devastated country of Syria. The Project Compassion theme is “A Just Future”. For

Bayan and many other children around the world, a just future starts with a safe place to learn – something which was previously denied her. The major humanitarian crisis which continues to unfold in Syria highlights the inevitable chaos when we forget we are one human family. Programs such as Project Compassion are an example of what a community like ours can contribute. By supporting and acting for justice and speaking out for the hundreds of thousands of children, women and men who have become displaced in Syria we imitate Jesus taking action in the temple.

If our own aggression could be employed for the advancement of God's kingdom, perhaps God's kingdom would be a more obvious domain in today's world. But too often we hang back from confronting the powers that devalue our beliefs. But in drawing back we continue to give permission to the traders to occupy the Temple. Sometimes disturbing the peace is the only Christian option