

A few years ago a friend sent me an email with excerpts from an interview between Oprah Winfrey and the poet Maya Angelou on the occasion of Maya Angelou's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. There were reflections on her life and some little nuggets of wisdom, and one stuck with me:

'I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.'

It reminded me that there are times when even for the most rational person, life is not all reason. Something catches us off guard or appeals to something deeper or more primordial, and emotions like frustration, sadness, or anger come to the fore. It is interesting to see how we handle ourselves in these unplanned and uncontrollable moments as indeed many of us have faced over the last year.

I don't know whether Jesus' visit to the temple in today's Gospel was, in fact, a spontaneous stop in his ministry or whether this whole incident was staged. St John - more so than any of the other gospel writers - stages pretty much everything for our benefit, to make careful arguments for his main message that Jesus, as he puts it later "is the Messiah, the Son of God."

But this episode has always struck me as interesting because it seems so out of character for Jesus. It's called "the cleansing of the temple," which also strikes me as interesting and a bit euphemistic since "cleansing" in my mind is associated with water and soap products, not whips and chains. Jesus is angry. St John tries to frame his action differently by putting into the disciple's minds the psalm "zeal for your house will consume me." The implication is that Jesus is doing what has to be done – driving out corruption, materialism, and false religion from the sanctuary of God. For John, that a lot of these merchants were just doing what needed to be done in order for people to worship in the temple according to standard practice is beside the point. The temple will soon be gone and in its place there will be a new kind of worship, a spiritual worship, with Jesus, the Christ, at its centre. So it's a bit ironic that the religious leaders ask for a "sign" from Jesus to legitimise his wiping out the marketplace. What he has done really is the sign of what is coming – the destruction of the whole temple, the raising up of "the temple of his body," the end of an era and the beginning of a whole new day.

This is not the only place in the gospels where Jesus gets angry. Think of the Pharisees, and the sharp words Jesus exchanges with the religious leaders. Or think of Peter, sharply rebuked only last week when he tries to tell Jesus what's what. And it's not the only place where he shows zeal – think of the energy that must have gone into withstanding the testing in the wilderness or the passion that must have gone into every exorcism, healing, or sermon. It's hard to imagine Jesus not doing everything in his ministry with zeal....but this is different.

This is the first time that Jesus' anger spills into angry action. His driving out the money changers might have been zealous but it ends in violence – not bone crunching violence but violence just the same.

"Righteous indignation" is the phrase I remember from my Sunday school days – anger that is justified because it is directed at some clear wrong; the anger often expressed by God's prophets in the Old Testament, and according to some, the only anger that isn't sinful.

Without a doubt Jesus saw himself as standing in the line of those prophets... and sometimes they got hot under the collar and ripped things or broke things to demonstrate what God was going to do with the nation of Israel if it kept up its destructive habits.

Maybe it's part of the paradox of Jesus humanity that the One who said, "Turn the other cheek," and "those who are angry with a brother or sister are liable to judgment" did not turn the other cheek in the portico of the temple that day.

But this whole episode raises for me questions about emotion and its expression – and just Jesus’ here, because God knows he took it on the chin more than once from the religious authorities, but also our own. It’s human to be impacted by rainy days and lost luggage. It’s human to reach the end of our tether with people when we have been in conflict with them for years. It’s human to express all emotions including potentially dangerous ones like anger, but how do we express them without burning down the house?

It’s possible to interpret Jesus’ outburst today in one of two ways. Maybe it was a controlled burn. Maybe he went to the temple deliberately because he knew what was going on. Maybe it was his stand against unjust practices in the market, like price fixing. Maybe it was his stand against the temple religion in general, and though his actions were startling and disruptive to the merchants Jesus was always in control and would go just so far. Yes the tables were overturned, but the house, so to speak, was never in danger.

Or maybe Jesus lost it. I know... it’s hard to imagine Jesus losing his temper but not inconceivable if we accept Jesus’ humanity as well as his divinity. This story comes at the beginning of St John’s gospel but the others put it towards the end, during Jesus final trip to Jerusalem. After dealing with the religious authorities for years, after dealing with conflict and stupidity and apathy for years, Jesus had had enough and something in the square that day triggered something in him very deep and very potent. What had been a contained burn overflowed. But, it’s hard for us to picture Jesus really angry.

Maybe it’s easier thinking of this whole thing as staged with Jesus always in control, but “control” is a relative word here. The fact is: we will never know Jesus’ emotional state in the temple. The question is: does it matter? Reacting or deliberate, Jesus tells the truth about what will happen to the temple and to his own body. Are we less inclined to follow Jesus if he was angry? Do we love him any less if he had a bad day? I think I might be inclined to love him a little more.

I don’t know what it’s like to walk on water or change water into wine. But I do know what it’s like to wake up sad on a rainy day or swear at tangled Christmas tree lights. Unfortunately I also know what it’s like to hurt someone when I thought I was just doing what needed to be done. But if the gospel writers included even this story about Jesus chasing after people with whips, with all its uncertainty about motives and self-possession, then surely there is grace even for me when I lose patience or my temper or my marbles.

This story forces me to consider what the real meaning of Christ’s gospel is; what the meaning of his death is and what, pushing back far enough, was the meaning even of the temple – that the God who made us does not stand far off, watching from afar, but enters human time and space, covenants with us, remains with us even in our darkest of moments, and in the end dies for us. This story gives me hope that it is not just the best parts but the whole of who we are that are known to God, that whether we are feeling less than perfect, damaged or downright destroyed, there is always the chance for new life. *For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and his weakness is stronger than human strength.*