

If Jesus Came to Our Church

John 2:13-22

According to the gospel writers, Jesus was a regular at religious activities. Luke says that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day “as was his custom” (4:16). The gospel stories suggest not only that Jesus attended meetings in the synagogue but also that he took part the major religious festivals and that he probably went to Jerusalem to do so. He very likely observed Passover in the spring, the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall, and the Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah) in the winter. To describe Jesus’ religious habits in today’s terms, one could say that every time the church doors were open he was there.

And he often gave the people around him something to talk about! Often Jesus created a disturbance in church. I suppose the ushers got nervous when they saw him coming. In Nazareth, for example, he read the text from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (61:1). When he expounded on that passage and seemed to take it seriously, he caused an uproar. The other worshipers ran him out of the synagogue and out of town, trying even to throw him from a cliff at the edge of town. One Sabbath day in Capernaum Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand during the service and initiated a fierce debate with the Pharisees (Mark 3:1-6). Once in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles he narrowly escaped arrest and possible stoning because when the ceremonial candles were lighted, Jesus proclaimed himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12-59).

But nothing else that Jesus ever did in church compared with his tirade in the court of the temple. The writer of John’s Gospel placed this event at the beginning of his story, but it’s clear that it occurred during Jesus’ last week, probably on Monday, the day after the ride into Jerusalem. The so-called “cleansing of the temple” was really a prophetic act. It was not just a temper tantrum on the part of Jesus; it was a deliberate step to get attention and to show what true religion should be and do.

It is commonly thought, perhaps from the “den of robbers” comment, that Jesus became angry spontaneously and that he drove the vendors and money-changers from the temple area because they were cheating the people who came for worship. Both of those assumptions are probably wrong. Jesus orchestrated the ride into the city on what we call Palm Sunday in order to make a point. It is likely that he also planned the demonstration at the temple.

Those who sold sacrificial animals were not necessarily dishonest in their practices. The whole business was highly regulated and tightly overseen. Moreover, the merchants and money-changers provided a necessary service. Pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the feast days or sacrifices found it much more convenient to purchase animals sacrifice on the site. Those who “bought and sold” were simply doing their job. When Jesus came at them with a whip, they no doubt thought him mad.

I find it interesting that in all the gospel stories there is no indication that Jesus talked about or participated in animal sacrifices. Apparently he was indifferent to this practice so deeply embedded in Jewish life and religion. Jesus saw the purpose of religion in the quotation he used from Isaiah 56:7: “Thus says the Lord, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’” Anything that conflicted with that purpose made the temple or any other religious shrine, to use a phrase from Jeremiah 7:11, a “den of robbers.”

Jesus frequently used unusual situations to teach. It’s almost as if he committed unpredictable actions to get attention. He certainly got attention when he disrupted the commercial activity in the court of the temple. When the temple authorities asked Jesus what right he had to interrupt worship and sacrifice, they played right into his hands. He explained his actions by pointing to his own coming death and resurrection. He felt that he could challenge the Jewish religious system because his life bore witness to the power of God in the world. That was what was significant.

If you look at this and Jesus' other experiences in religious settings, you are able to put together what Jesus thought important about religion and what he thought unnecessary or even dehumanizing. He seemed to think that religious activities and systems should aid or serve people, that they should guide persons to experience the presence of God without limitations, that they should help persons know that they belong to God, and that they should work for justice and peace. It is my perception, based on what I see in the gospel stories, that Jesus involved himself in activities that addressed human need and oneness with God.

If that observation is accurate, does it apply to the organization that we today call the church of Jesus Christ? To be a little more practical, let's consider the question of what might happen were Jesus to attend a 21st century church. What if he were to visit our church? Would he cause a commotion?

What do you think Jesus would do or say? Would he praise or condemn our priorities? Are we focusing on the needs of people or on our own needs? The church must always face that question. No matter how large or small, wealthy or poor, that issue lies before the people of God.

We have our rationalizations about institutional needs. But remember that the money-changers and vendors in the temple were not doing anything wrong. They were just doing what they had always done. When we give and when we divide what we bring, we must ask just how much persons are being served by the resources of the church.

Clarence Jordan was one of the founders of the Koinonia community in Americus, Georgia in 1942. The community was based on the concepts of equality, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of all possessions. Jordan was visiting a church in Florida where one of the members proudly showed him a garden called "Flowers of the Bible." The garden featured an abundance of roses of Sharon and lilies of the valley. The member boasted that the garden had cost the church forty thousand dollars. Clarence Jordan said, "In

that same city, I visited a day care center with approximately seventy-five of God's little flowers in it. They were black flowers. Their playground, I give you my word, was hardly as big as a garage. They had no equipment. And here these idiotic 'Christians' spent forty thousand dollars on exotic flowers and not one dime on God's little flowers."

The prophets had taught that compassion for others is as important as belief in God. Jesus seemed to agree. He was not able to worship in a setting where human need went unattended.

Jesus also reacted strongly to false ideas about Sabbath observance and regulations that restricted persons in their quest for oneness with God. When I consider that, I think of all the silly things the modern church does that have a similar effect. Many persons in church life try to control God through the concept of Biblical infallibility or Biblical literalism. They hope thereby to pin God down, to make God live up to the "promises" they perceive in such an approach. Of course, if everyone else is wrong and is left out of God's activity, that's just too bad! Many fail to understand the connection between religion and science and end up promoting a scientific worldview that misses the wonder and grandeur of God's evolving creation. Many Christians sadly are simply fearful, and as a result, they are like the Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus said, "You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them" (Mt. 23:13-14).

Are we celebrating something or protecting something? I want to share a story that I have found very meaningful. I discovered it a number of years ago in a book by William Barclay. I can't recall whether it came from his autobiography or one of his commentaries. A hiker in the Rocky Mountains fell in with an old Roman Catholic priest on the trail. He was amazed to find so aged a man struggling along the rugged path. The hiker asked the priest, "What are you doing here?" The old man answered, "I am seeking beauty in the world." "But,"

said the hiker, "you're seeking beauty a little late in life, aren't you?" So the old priest told his story.

He had spent nearly his whole life in a monastery. He had observed all the rules and disciplines with extreme care. Fellow monks had seen him spend hours on his knees in prayer; he had impressed them with his piety and good works. In time he fell seriously ill, and in his illness he saw a vision. An angel came to his bedside. "What have you come for?" he asked the angel. "To lead you home," the angel said. "Is it a beautiful world to which I am going?" asked the priest. The angel replied, "It is a beautiful world that you are leaving."

The priest said that then he remembered that he had been so anxious about expressing his religion that he had seen nothing of the world in which he lived. So he said to the angel, "But I have seen very little beauty in the world I am leaving." "Then," said the angel, "I fear you will see little beauty in the world to which you are going." "I was in trouble," the priest continued, "and I begged that I might stay for just two more years. My prayer was granted, and I am spending the little money and the little time I have exploring the world's loveliness. And I find it wonderful!"

Jesus came to open us to the wonder of God and to the sense of union with God. He came to reveal God's love to all persons and to all creation. He came to demonstrate the presence of the kingdom of God. Any form of religious expression should aim toward those goals.

If Jesus were to come to our church, would he celebrate or turn things upside down? I like to believe that he is here. It is kind of frightening though, isn't it?

J. William Harris
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