

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

(Year B)

*Christ, The Wisdom Of God.*

*Today, we celebrate the foolishness of God that is wiser than any human wisdom: the utter folly of his love that allowed the destruction of the temple of the body of his Son. And we dedicate ourselves anew to the Law of the Lord which gives wisdom to the simple.*

*(Readings: Exodus 20: 1-17. 1 Corinthians 1: 22-25. John 2: 13-25.)*

Just in case we had any doubts about the baser ways of humanity, and the kind of world in which we live, psychologists tell us that aggression is an inherent part of our most elemental make-up; and that our innate, deeply-rooted aggression plays a very important part in the way we relate to other people.

We speak openly and freely about nations that have ‘aggressive’ foreign policies. We readily accept, as a ‘fact of life’, that the stronger, more influential, even coercive, so-called, ‘First-World’ nations all but force the weaker, vulnerable nations to conform to their values and philosophies.

Most of us would consider it to be just a part of the cut-and-thrust of international commerce, to make aggressive deals, to beat down the competition, and to win that all-important contract by almost any means the businessman or woman can get away with.

We secretly admire, and are inspired and stimulated, even thrilled, by those dubious entrepreneurs; those who effortlessly manipulate people without sparing a thought for their victims. And yet, despite knowing this, we remain quite reluctant to speak about our own aggressive attitudes and behaviour. We carefully wrap them in a language of, supposedly civilised gentility. But try as we might, our natural, base-tendencies eventually permeate through the strained disguise of outwardly calm civility.

Perhaps our reluctance to admit to our aggression is because we somehow associate it with the negative, the more destructive variety, even the more extreme aggressions, such as the mindless infliction of cruelty on the defenceless; from the wanton physical or mental bullies, to the overtly malevolent violence of, say, sex offenders.

Having said all of that, paradoxically, aggression can actually be a constructive act. The word ‘aggression’ comes from the Latin root *aggredi*, a word that means ‘to go forward’, to ‘approach’, or to ‘move against’. It follows, then, that constructive aggression, in its truest sense, more properly means working, in say, a hostile environment, against a power that devalues one’s beliefs.

One example of ‘constructive aggression’ is seen in the effective campaign against slavery. The Abolitionists were not content to merely assert, or to explain their values; they moved against the authorities that protected and perpetuated the slave-trade. When they confronted angry mobs – which they often did – they risked, not only their social standing, and their livelihoods, but their very lives. Even so, their conviction was strengthened by the self-same power of the violently aggressive opposition they faced.

One of the more prominent leaders of the anti-slavery movement in the United States was William Lloyd Garrison. And he wrote the following on the subject:

“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 shall not retreat a single inch... The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal.”

Prophetic words, fulfilled last year in this country. – And, if there had been statues in the Temple, they would probably have leapt off their pedestals as Jesus organised a riot in the Temple precincts.

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 oppose the power that undermines and devalues his beliefs.

There is neither politeness nor subtlety about the scene. If Jesus is worried about being arrested for disturbing the peace, no one would ever have guessed it 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 brought total disruption; where there was business as usual, he brought unusual hostility.

By way of explanation John tells us that Jesus’ disciples remember the words of scripture; “Zeal for your house will devour me.” Jesus is overcome by zeal; by a passion shown in positive aggression.

The outer court of the Temple has become a market where animals can be bought for sacrifice, and where visiting pilgrims can change their money into 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.” And after Jesus clears out the Temple, the holy place is reclaimed for the worship of God. But soon enough, as St John tells us, the Temple will be replaced by a new sanctuary where people can meet God; where they can meet him in the person of the risen Jesus himself.

The portrait of Jesus in today’s gospel seems a world away from the storybook caricature of a ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’; a figure of someone who is harmless and placid, with never a harsh word on his lips. But this would be as far from the truth of Jesus as would, say, caricaturing him as a ‘godfather of violence’, or a ‘revolutionary’, supporting wholesale carnage and murder for the sake of the cause. And yet, Jesus did use force in the Temple. He was undeniably aggressive. But he didn’t use force to secure a ‘*coup d’état*’. He wasn’t a nationalist leader, nor did he use aggression to gain power for himself. His kingdom could never be established by, or on violence.

Jesus’ aggression was at the service of his Father’s house. And the only casualties of his aggression (and I mean ‘casualties’ in the very mildest sense) were the displaced traders and their ejected wares.

If only our aggression could be used to promote God’s kingdom. Perhaps then, it would have a clearer prominence in today’s world. But no! Unlike Jesus we tend to timidly shy away from properly confronting the powers that so flagrantly devalue it and our beliefs.

By our inaction we permit, indeed, we enable the traders to subjugate the Temple, that is, Christ’s own Church. – Sometimes, disturbing the peace is the right and only Christian option.

