

Lent 3B 15th March, 2009
Exodus 20:1-17; Ps 19; 1 Cor 1: 18-25; John 2:13-22
Wholistic Faith

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Ps 19:14)

In a lecture this week, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams argued that *“it is essential for ethical behaviour to be an integral part of the economic process”*. He said: *“Ethics... is about negotiating conditions in which the most vulnerable are not abandoned”*. He goes on to denounce what has seemingly become acceptable practice in the First World, or Western society –that is, the practice of *“securing prosperity here, by making prosperity impossible somewhere else.”*ⁱ In other words, richer countries exploit poorer ones for their own advantage.

Rowan Williams is exposing - in very polite, measured, academic words –what it is that got Jesus going in the outer courts of the Temple at Jerusalem, as we heard in our Gospel reading today. Can you hear Rowan –and the voices of many in the Church - joining with Jesus voice, as Jesus thrashed the whip and overthrew the tables?: *“This world is God’s dominion; the heavens have declared it; God has given his Law and Commandments in love, drawing everything in life under his covering and protection, to revive our souls and for our hearts to rejoice. Look at you –you’re abusing and ruining this treasure of the Life given to you; like the corrupt traders in the marketplaces, you are exploiting the poor and making a mockery of heart-centered, justice-centered worship.”*

Here we find Jesus acting out of a deep foundational principle –the same principle directing the substance of the Ten Commandments – everything in life is gathered into God’s dominion; bound together by **love**. And we’ll see this quality, this love, in the way we freely enter into an attitude of honoring God and relationship with him, and in the way we act towards others – with mercy, justice, respect. And just as God gives his love equally, without discrimination to all creation, so we, too can’t discriminate, nor can we pick and choose whether or not we act with wholistic integrity. There’s no way we can act as if some things or choices in our lives fall under God’s province and others don’t. As we find in the Ten Commandments, there is no separation between the spiritual and physical, the religious and the political, the heart of God and the economic.

Nor can we keep God locked up in the Holy of Holies and fool ourselves that he has no part in what goes on in the fringes of his Temple. We can’t confine God to things we narrowly define as being “religious” and keep him out of the world’s marketplaces. And in the specific terms of this story, we can’t keep religion separated from the economics of society.

Now- some background to the message of the Gospel: the Temple in Jerusalem for the Jews in Jesus’ time was more than just the place they gathered for religious ritual. It was the dwelling place of God, the place where God and humans meet. To be a good, holy Jew meant that you made the pilgrimage at Passover, to the Temple at Jerusalem, with all the swelling crowds, to make the right offerings and participate in the right rituals. People travelled long distances to get there, and many were unable to bring their own animals or

doves on the journey –so they needed to be able to buy the acceptable offerings. There were elaborate ways that God was approached, and complex rituals which involved the sacrifice of animals. The Temple system imposed taxes, and necessitated exchange of the State's coinage (with its image of Caesar) for Temple coins. Money was also needed to purchase animals for sacrifice. All of this necessarily involved money changers and the presence of animals at the Temple.

Various interpretations of this episode have held sway in the church over the years –like Jesus being angry that there were smelly animals fouling holy ground, and fury over financial transactions in a holy place, and even that finance belonged outside in the world and was no business of faith or the ambit of the Church.

Jesus' anger was not about the mess of animals within the Temple confines. Nor was it about commercial business taking place in the Temple. These transactions were part and parcel of the Temple system, supposedly an enabling of people to make the proper sacrificial offerings. And besides that, this courtyard –the grand portico called the Royal Stoa - was not considered to be sacred ground. But all of this had potential for abuse. What had started out to facilitate proper worship had become an exploitative economic system in its own right. It was the poorest people who were being ripped off; made to pay extraordinary prices, even for the smallest offering of a dove. Access to God was beginning to revolve around economic circumstances – if you couldn't afford the money lender's rates, or the sacrificial animals were out of reach of your purse, then tough: you were left out of the ritual worship of God!

What Jesus was so strongly reacting to was not just corruption and exploitation over money changing and the sale of sacrificial animals, but the maintenance of a religious system and the abuse of God-given authority that had pushed the real worship of God to the edges. Real worship was about following the heart and spirit behind the Law and the Commandments. Real worship wasn't just what happened in the Holy of Holies; wasn't just to do with the right religious rituals and offerings. Real worship was the offering of the whole of one's life: ourselves as living sacrifices: the very words we use to go out from our holy of holies, the Eucharist.

What was supposed to be part of a holy offering had become hollow, with corrupt transactions and exploitation of the poor: the very antithesis of the spirit of the law. If God's vision for the world –the fullness of life found in him - was to be made visible through the honoring of God and through the integrity of the spirit of the Commandments, then what Jesus encountered in the Temple fell far short of this. Where was justice? Where was the protection of the vulnerable? Where was *love*, with its tags of justice and mercy: the foundation of the relationship between God and humankind?

Here we have God's vision for us to live full, holistically healthy lives in a relationship of love with him and each other. This vision is both communal and personal: a personal faith must be expressed and it must be lived in relationship to others. Justice, peace, reconciliation and respect for God's creation, and all those good values for a better world, flow from this. There is nothing on earth or anything we do that is excluded from the reign of God in Christ. Nothing – not even our financial practices, our sexual behaviour, our consumerism or coveting of things. Nothing.

So, where are we with us? We come back to the all-embracing nature of God's presence with us and our world, where we cannot separate God's call and Christ's life from how we behave in every aspect of our lives. And to pick on one thing in particular that looms large from today's gospel: in this everyday context of sorting through the mess of the world's financial meltdown, we cannot separate how we engage with the world's financial or economic systems from our worship of Christ and our following of him.

In the most simple terms, it means that what I choose to buy here in Australia, or what I invest in, determines how others will live in the Third World. I may well be shopping and eating at the expense of vulnerable and impoverished others, in struggling economies in other nations. As Rowan Williams pointed out, "[Christians cannot accept] *that wealth maintained at the cost of the neighbour's disadvantage or worse is a tolerable situation*". You and I don't have the power at large to change the world's economic systems. But we can begin to make a difference – even something like shopping fairly, with a mind to the effect our dollar has on the source of the commodity – for example, through Fair Trade – that "space of integrity", as it's described – can make a difference, it can change lives, as small or insignificant as it may sound. And if you're brave enough to invest your money at present – look for ethical investments, even at a lesser return. (And that's the sort of "foolishness in the eyes of the world" that Paul was referring to in the New Testament reading today)

And to finish: Rowan William's again, declaring: "*living as part of creation brings with it a sense of the common destiny and common predicament of humanity. But more specifically, the Scriptural understanding of our calling sees the ideal human community as one in which the welfare and giftedness of each and the welfare of all are inseparable. The clear sense [is] that we must resist policies or practices which accept the welfare of some at the expense of others.*" (end of quote)

The invitation for all of us today in this time of Lenten self-reflection is to examine our own practices, and make amends where our choices may disadvantage others –even unseen others in lands far way; and so allow ourselves and others to live more deeply into the wholeness of life offered to us through Christ. Can you stand alongside Jesus and the modern day prophets in this? *Amen*

ⁱ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2322>