

A family crisis

John 2:13-22

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¹³The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. ¹⁵And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he spoke of the temple of his body. ²²When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.



According to the Gospel of Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke, Jesus went up to Jerusalem just once. This visit to Jerusalem included the scene that you have just viewed. That visit, which happened according to Mark on what we call Palm Sunday, a week before Easter, triggered the reaction of the religious establishment in Jerusalem to eliminate Jesus. Why did it have that reaction?

Well, let's think for a moment about Jerusalem in Jesus' day. There was never a time during Jesus' life when the Romans were not in control in Jerusalem. In fact, when Jesus was about 10, the Romans kicked out the last rightful High Priest from the Temple and installed their own High Priest, a man named Annas. Though he had no claim to become the rightful High Priest, this man Annas, created a dynasty, with one son after another following him as High Priest. When Jesus began his public ministry, perhaps 20 years after Annas came to power and a generation before their end, the dynasty appeared untouchable. By the time of Jesus' public ministry, Annas's daughter had married a man named Caiaphas, who had become the High Priest.

This isn't just ancient history. You've heard these names before. Maybe you don't remember Annas, though he's there in the pages of the New Testament. But, I'm sure that all of you here who know anything about the death of Jesus know that it was Caiaphas who presided over the kangaroo-court that tried Jesus.

Israel had always been plagued by corrupt leadership. But, this dynasty of High Priests was unlike anything before. Appointed by Rome, it was only interested in its own survival and was willing to do anything to stay in power. And Jesus stood in their way of achieving that, proclaiming openly their corruption. Not surprisingly, they found a way to hand Jesus over to the Romans to be dishonoured publicly and finally crucified. Even when the Romans wanted to release Jesus, because they couldn't find any guilt in him, it was the High Priests and their scribes who urged the people to cry out for Barabbas's release and Jesus' crucifixion. But, finally, their corruption caused their own demise. The Romans eventually became so angered with their corrupt rule, their continued inability to bring forth justice to the people that the people were rebelling and rioting in the streets, that the Romans simply said, 'enough!', and marched against Jerusalem and destroyed it and the Temple with it. The dynasty that began with the Romans also ended with the Romans, and so did all Jewish High Priesthood. There was never again to be a High Priest.

This is what corrupt leadership does and this is its inevitable end. Corrupt leadership allies itself with the strong forces of the day; it abuses and kills the innocent; and eventually it collapses under its own weight of corruption. It is evil, and in God's time it and the powers of evil that have made it what it is will be destroyed.

Let's make sure that we get the story right. It was not the Romans who are the enemy in the story of Jesus. All the Romans wanted in the land of Israel was 'peace, order, and good government'. That's not so bad, is it? The problem is not the Romans were strong; the problem is that the Romans were not strong enough! A weak Roman governor named Pontius Pilate, rather than ensuring peace, order, and good government through justice, simply capitulated to the Jewish mob led by the High Priests and had Jesus put to death in order to keep the peace, to keep the order. But, it was hardly good government. Rome knew that Pilate was a bad governor, too, and he was soon removed from office and exiled to about as far from Rome as he could be for a quiet retirement where he wouldn't cause any more problems for the Emperor Tiberius.

No, Rome was not the real enemy. They were in fact too weak to be the real enemy.

Nor was the enemy the priesthood in Jerusalem. There had been good priests in Israel's history. But, the enemy did manifest himself in this priesthood. Because this priesthood under Annas had fallen into the hands of the real enemy, the one who always was the enemy, Satan, the father of lies. In Jesus' day, the High Priesthood was built on lies. And they were willing to lie and to make alliances with corrupt figures within Jesus' own close-knit group of disciples, with people like Judas, who would be willing to betray Jesus in exchange for a nice purse of treasure worth, oh, about the equivalent today of \$50,000. They would cling to power even if it meant destroying the Temple.

The Temple in Jerusalem had, at its very core, the Holy of Holies, the place in which God the Father is supposed to meet with God's people and speak face-to-face with them in the person of the High Priest alone. That High Priest is to be guarantor and the guardian of the purity of God's word as it is brought to the people. But, if that priesthood was now in the power of the father of lies, anything that they would say to the people would be tainted. God's own word proclaimed from the heart of the Temple would be distorted and perverted. Rather than radiating out purity to the world, the Temple would radiate forth lies and corruption, first of all into the courts of the Temple and then into the immediate streets around the Temple. And that corruption is what you see in the Temple that has thus become in Jesus' day no better than a common public market-place, where buying and selling are more real than the purification of God's own people. Waves of corruption radiated forth from the Temple, and only one man stood in the way of

these waves of corruption. Not a new Moses but one greater than Moses who would part the waves of corruption and bring forth a new people into a new land with a new temple.

That man Jesus began with a prophetic declaration: 'Jerusalem, this holy place, my Father's house, a place of prayer for all nations, has become a whore. But, it will be cleansed.' And on that day Jesus began to show what that cleansing will look like. You saw it illustrated visually in a compelling way in the film. It was a harbinger of what would happen to the whole Temple in a generation's time when the Romans destroyed it.

But that day was not only at the end of Jesus' life. The Gospel of John, to which the Lenten lectionary points us today for a number of reasons, makes it explicit that at the very outset of Jesus' ministry and throughout that ministry the religious establishment saw Jesus as a threat to them because he identified them as being in the power of the father of lies. And so they pursued him throughout his public ministry to try to turn the people away from him, to try to ensnare him in their traps, and even to try to silence him even by having him killed, even as Zerah the fictional scribe in Zefferelli's film suggests. John makes it clear that it wasn't just in isolated synagogues that were out of touch with real Judaism that Jesus was challenged. No, from the very beginning, the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, seeking to increase their wealth and their power and to hang on to at all costs, are willing to do anything to get rid of this Jesus who challenges them.

But, while they clearly understood that Jesus was talking about them when he was talking about lies and corruption in the house of God, what they could not have understood was what Jesus was saying about himself. That God would never cease to be present to and speak with His people. The Temple in Jerusalem was intended to be that place. But, it had become so corroded and corrupted by Satanic lies, that it had to be completely dismantled. In its place, Jesus promises, a new temple will be built that will replace it.

And what was that new Temple to be? Jesus tells the High Priests, but they can't understand. Jesus' disciples do, however. That place will be the risen body of Jesus. Wherever two or three people gather to worship in the new holy of holies, the risen body of Jesus, there God will be in the very midst of them, face to face, even as God was to the High Priest, and God will speak with them, through His Word. And this body will grow and spread throughout Israel, throughout Samaria, eventually even to places like Frisia! In other words, to the end of the earth. That new temple continues to grow and spread forth today, and here we are in the midst of one small chapel within the new temple of God, the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself.

My friends, you know from your school studies that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We also know from Scripture that power does so because it is a tool used by the father of lies to tempt and capture humans for his purposes. He uses it to tempt them to strive with all their might to hang on to what they have and gain more. He tested Jesus with it in the wilderness: I can offer you all of the kingdoms of the world, Jesus ... just do my will. If Satan is able to get people in great positions of power -- especially the kind of people who make it to the top of religious institutions -- he will have his most powerful weapon. Why? Because these are the people who are supposed to be seen as most pure, most just, most selfless. And if he can use that appearance of goodness, justice, purity, and selflessness as a mask for his purposes, he will have achieved a great victory. And so, unless these people are challenged, as Jesus challenged them, and unless they repent as the High Priests in Jerusalem did not, or move on, or die, they and the institution that they have made corrupt through their own corruption will be destroyed by God, the author of truth, the victor over lies. It has happened again and again throughout history. It happened with the destruction of the priesthood and the Temple in Jerusalem. And it happens with

denominations and churches and church leaders who fall into the hands of the father of lies, who begin to cling to power rather than allowing themselves to be consumed with love for my Father's house and my Father's people.

What about you? What about this church? Will you continue to be part of Jesus' new temple, letting go of the vain hopes that Satan offers of worldly well-being, world power, and everlasting life in this world, allowing yourselves to be consumed with love even as Jesus was for this world, and entrusting yourselves with Jesus into the hands of a loving Father who assures you that you will be raised as Jesus was on the third day?