

Jesus College

Tear This Temple Down: A Sermon for Lent and for Florida

On John 2:13-22

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is among our oldest surviving Greek tragedies. It contains these verses (179-81):

'grief, the reminder of pain, drips onto the heart
in sleep: wisdom comes
even to those who don't want it.'

Aristotle was more blunt in his *Politics*. 'Learning,' he wrote, 'comes with pain' (1339a28-9).

This truth was plain long before the incarnation. It didn't take God walking the earth for humans to figure out that getting smarter hurts.

What isn't obvious is why. *That's* a question I ask when I turn to the Gospel: why should growth be painful? Becoming wiser, more discerning, less impulsive — these are good things. Why don't they *feel* good? Today's reading suggests to me a possible answer.

The money-changers in Jerusalem's temple were selling the Tyrian tetradrachma, a coin required for paying the tax owed by Jewish men to their religious authorities. We might wonder what's so wrong about that — why Jesus attacked them so harshly. Many readers imagine it was because they were profiteers, gouging the faithful with exorbitant fees for the only sanctioned currency.

Maybe. But it's equally possible that prices were fair, so far as that goes. Whatever the exchange rate, I bet the guys on those benches didn't consider themselves extortionate criminals. They might have thought they were performing a useful service: people have to pay the tax, so someone's got to sell them the appropriate cash. The modern parallel isn't Al Capone, it's the dude behind the till at NatWest: every year around Passover, he kisses his wives and kids and plods off to exchange shekels. Business as usual.

Enter Jesus. With a whip. This threadbare nobody in the grips of religious frenzy strides into a place of worship and starts upending tables. He isn't throwing a tantrum about pricey interest rates: he's dismantling the entire seemingly respectable industry, rejecting wholesale its premise that there should be fees for admission to God's house. The money-changers are just following the rules of their religion

and their profession, but those rules themselves are wrong. They implicate even law-abiding people in a network of appalling impiety.

During Lent, people adopt various spiritual disciplines. We give up things that alienate us from God, or practise habits that revitalise our experience of Him. But in one sense that's actually the easy part. Cutting back on alcohol, giving alms weekly — things like that make us coauthors of our own spiritual maturation, grown-ups who can identify our shortcomings and change course. In a word, practicing discipline gives us control.

Whereas sin goes deeper than just what we knowingly choose to do. If you doubt this, ask yourself whether you always like your instinctive reactions to things. When a beggar stops you on the street, is your impulsive response one of generous empathy? Or do the reflexive mechanisms of your subconscious cough up some ugly urge to tell the guy he can go to hell? Maybe you fight that urge back; I hope you beat it. Still, it was there in the first place. The whole system — the whole world — is broken. As products of that world, we are broken, in ways we can't always see or control.

Which means we need another kind of discipline, the kind that comes from outside to wrench us out of a normalcy which felt like it was working fine. In Jesus we have a God who cares enough to interrupt our comfortable but quietly malignant *status quo*.

Maybe that's why it hurts to develop and improve: it entails having our inner lives invasively restructured, like a broken bone that has to be set before it can grow right. Maybe you wanted that job so bad you had to lose it to realise your attachment to it was killing your joy. Maybe I'm delighted with a political orthodoxy which has to be torn to the ground before I can see that it was only working for the elites.

I want to be very clear about what I'm not saying. I am not trying to offer you some glib answer to the infamous 'problem of pain,' the question of why a God who is Love should create a world containing such terrible miseries as ours contains. It would be intolerably callous and false to claim that all suffering is just God teaching us a lesson. I am only suggesting that God uses some of our suffering to heal our brokenness — or rather that suffering is what that healing feels like to us.

But the worst kinds of pain can't be understood in that way. Just recently in my home country seventeen people were gunned down inside a school by someone in the grips of something too twisted to name. There

is no way, not in this world, to explain why such things can happen. That is what makes them so hideously awful.

This passage has something to say about that too. When Jesus said, 'destroy this temple and I will raise it,' His listeners thought He meant *their* temple, the one He had just forcibly invaded. But in fact He was talking about His own body. Somehow when we undergo violence, it turns out that God does too.

I suppose I see one way that could be true. The Ancient Greeks imagined their gods impassively dispensing happiness and anguish from ceramic jars (cf. *Iliad* [24.524-33](#)). But we have a very different image, from the *Letter to the Hebrews*: God saving the world from sin is like a father correcting a child ([12:5-11](#)). Good parents will tell you that correcting children does not feel like distributing arbitrary gifts from pieces of stoneware. 'This hurts me as much as it hurts you' is a cliché, but it expresses a real truth: if you love someone, you suffer when they suffer. I said just now that the whole cosmos is broken, and that resetting broken things involves pain. Perhaps for a being who is Himself Love, resetting an entire world from root to branch literally means experiencing extreme pain alongside that world.

But I also said that sin is a structural feature of the universe into which we are involuntarily born. So though I can see how fixing that structure might involve pain, I still cannot even begin to understand why parents have to be grieving murdered children right now in Florida. Maybe God grieves with them, but that does not alleviate this maddening injustice: the victims of that shooting never chose to enter this fallen world, nor did they deserve to be so horrifically wounded at its hands.

So yes: sometimes we make painful sacrifices because we know they're good for us. Sometimes even when pain blindsides us, we can understand how God uses it to edify us. But other times, when we witness nightmares like the one in Florida, it is impossible to see any earthly or heavenly reason why such a hellish thing should happen. Attempts to explain become cruel and inadequate.

Hear this, though: even when our explanations fail us, our God does not. Because this agony of being unable to understand is the last and deepest agony Christ chose to share with us. In the throes of his death on Calvary, Jesus did not rationalise His pain. To the contrary: He asked, 'why?' He joined in our worst kind of experience, the experience of asking that question and receiving no answer.

Therefore it is not by coming up with pious explanations for why we suffer that we draw nearer to our suffering God. Instead, Christ draws nearest to us when we can furnish no such explanation: in those moments our experience and His become identical. This is a solidarity between us and God which goes right down to His flesh and blood: when our temple is invaded, Jesus' body is also dismantled. Every time one of those kids got shot, Christ's flesh was pierced too. And though we may not feel it, this bodily union between us and Jesus is real, as real as this table. And this bread. And this wine.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' To try to answer that question is to sell it short. On the cross, Jesus acknowledges with us that any acceptable answer would have to come from beyond what we can now see. We have just a hint of that answer — a first taste, to paraphrase St Paul (Romans 8:22-30). Destroy this temple and I will raise it: on Easter Sunday Christ made good on that promise, and that too is a reality whether we know it or understand it or not. We who follow Jesus into and beyond death do so in the faith that He will also make good on this promise: because He suffers bodily in our suffering, we will rise bodily in His resurrected glory. Then — only then — God will give those kids in Florida the unimaginable answer that makes sense of their senseless pain. And of their families' pain. And of yours and mine, and of His own. Amen.