

## **Zeal for God's House**

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 6, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

An angry Jewish settler enters a mosque and machine guns dead fifty Moslems as they kneel to worship. An angry Lebanese opens fire on a van carrying Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, New York killing and maiming. Anger in the name of religion is an ugly thing.

Anger in the name of religion. An angry father physically abuses his daughter for coming home too late because the Bible says, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Anger can kill. Anger can maim. Anger can destroy. Some of us, perhaps, grew up in homes where mother and father were angry all the time. The atmosphere of many a home is poisoned by angry and frightening words and actions. Probably none of us are exempt from displaying ugly and violent anger from time to time.

It's very difficult, therefore, to talk about the Anger of God when we see the violent acts perpetrated by angry people. It's a dangerous thing, now-a-days, to talk about the anger of God because it's so easily confused with the destructive, even sadistic anger that is perpetrated in the name of religion. And yet the Bible talks about the anger of God.

But the Bible talks about God's anger as an expression of God's love. God will not forever stand by helplessly and watch his children destroy themselves. I say 'the anger of God' because John, in his Gospel, wants us to recognize that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, God with us. In Jesus we see, not only the anger of a human being, but also the anger of God. Jesus was loving, kind, compassionate and forgiving.

But he also sometimes got angry.

One thing characterized the anger of Jesus. What angered Jesus was the unjust things people do in the name of religion. Nowhere do we see his anger so clearly as when he came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Upon arriving, he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers seated at their tables. He made a whip of cords and drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!" Jesus was angry.

What was behind the anger of Jesus? Love was behind his anger. Every Jew over nineteen years of age had to pay the Temple tax for the services and maintenance of the Temple. In Palestine all kinds of currencies were used. Coins from Rome, Greece, Egypt, Tyre and Sidon were all circulated and used. These coins, however, had images of pagan gods on them. A Jew could use this money to buy things in the market place but couldn't pay his Temple tax with this pagan money. So Money-changers were permitted to set up tables in the spacious courtyard around the Temple. For a fee, they'd exchange pagan money for Jewish coins which were acceptable in the Temple. These money changers charged an exorbitant fee for the necessary exchange. In fact the charge amounted to a whole days wage. What angered Jesus was that the pilgrims to the Passover, who could ill afford it, were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money-changers.

Besides the money-changers there were sellers of oxen, sheep and doves. When pilgrims visited the Temple they offered sacrifices. The Law of God required every

animal offered in sacrifice to be perfect and flawless. The Temple authorities appointed inspectors to examine the animals. If a worshiper bought an animal outside the Temple it was certain to be examined and rejected. Worshipers were, therefore, forced to buy sacrificial animals in the Temple courtyard at exorbitant prices. Here again, in the name of religion, pilgrims were being ripped off. It was blatant social injustice in the name of religion and Jesus was angry. He was angry because he loved his people. His anger is the anger of God.

In every age there've been those who rip off people in the name of religion. It was this type of thing that led to the sixteenth century Reformation. Pope Leo X sent John Tetzel into Saxony to sell indulgences in order to collect money for building St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tetzel beat a drum and loudly sang: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." People thought you could buy indulgences that would release a soul from the agony of purgatory. Luther saw this as a money-making scheme. He shouted "I'll put a hole in Tetzel's drum!" and he did this with his attack on indulgences. Luther was merely following the example of Jesus. The same thing happens today. We get angry when we hear and read about the extravagant lifestyles of some of the televangelists, and rightly so. It makes us angry when we read that money collected to help an orphanage in Haiti is being used by a televangelist to buy an air-conditioned dog house. We get angry when flamboyant faith healers are exposed as charlatans.

Behind this kind of activity, whether of someone like John Tetzel in the 16th century or televangelists today, is teaching and preaching that our relationship to God is something that we can buy or earn or contribute to in any way. Jesus came and

died so that we might know and be assured that our relationship to God – God’s grace and love and mercy come to us as a free gift.

Martin Luther, preaching on the anger of Jesus in the cleansing of the Temple, points out that salvation is a free gift. Sacrifices of oxen, sheep, goats and doves can’t earn God’s love and blessing. Giving money can’t earn God’s love and blessing. God saves us by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our salvation cost Jesus his life. Our salvation costs us nothing. Those sacrifices proscribed by God for the Old Testament people of God were temporary. They could never put us right with God. They were meant to prepare God’s people for the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus referred to this when he said those cryptic words which the disciples understood only after the resurrection. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Jesus was referring to the Temple of his body. He would be crucified, dead and buried but he’d rise again from the dead. The Temple of his body would be raised. From that time on, the important thing is not whether we worship in a cathedral, a fellowship hall or a store front but whether we worship in spirit and in truth. When our worship is focused on Christ and when we gather to give thanks to God for the salvation given to us through Christ, we are worshiping in Spirit and in truth.

Let me say a dangerous and foolish thing at this point. Do we realize that the sacrifices we make for this church don’t contribute in any way to the relationship we enjoy with God. Hopefully, whatever sacrifices we make to see this church grow and be a faithful witness, we make out of gratitude for God’s free grace that comes to us through Jesus Christ. All God wants is our gratitude and love. If you gave no money

at all and if you were to make no sacrifices at all God would not love you less. If you make more sacrifices for Christ's Church than anyone else and give more money than any one else, God loves you no more than the person who is unable or unwilling to sacrifice or give anything at all. All is grace. It is a free gift.

And yet when we're in Christ and worship in Spirit and Truth we also will share the anger of Jesus especially for those unjust things which are done in the name of religion and we'll actually do something about those injustices. We'll give and we'll make sacrifices out of love for God and our neighbors. Bosnia angers me. The blood shed in the Middle East angers me. There are many things that anger me in the world, in the church and in my own personal life. Our anger should lead us to act constructively and courageously to correct the evils and cleanse and purify the church.

Twentieth century American Christianity has often been thought of as a comfortable, middle class, good natured, polite collection of volunteers who conveniently scheduled service projects. Amiable, friendly, comfortable, non-confronting, pleasant. We try to present the Christian faith as something merely fun and self-fulfilling. But while the church should remember the compassionate nature of God, it should not forget that there's also the awesome holiness of God that burns with an irresistible heated rage at injustice and corruption that takes advantage of the less powerful in society. We should not forget the anger of Jesus nor his zeal for God's house.

Almighty God