

John 2:3 - God's Foolishness Enters the Temple

What are we to make of the Jesus in today's gospel — almost unhinged image of Christ, the divine Word made flesh with a whip?

After all, this seems rather out of character for Jesus, especially Jesus in the Gospel of John where he often seems so cool, above it all. Where he is so in control he appears to dance about with his own death before they finally meet in a long-expected and, we understand, completely consensual consummation. It's almost balletic the way the gospel presents it. Jesus so deftly doing as he pleases, saying what he wants: I am I am I am GOD but you're not going to kill me yet.

So where's this raging Jesus literally lashing out come from? How's he fit in?

This, I think, is Jesus as holy fool; Jesus as a living embodiment of God's foolishness as Paul terms it.

Really, in a way this whole scene seems rather farcical, slapdash and slapstick - a one act play starring Jesus as the most Holy Fool of God.

To begin with, this clearing of the temple narrative comes just a few days before Jesus's crucifixion in all the other gospels. And it is precisely this temple showdown that is thought by many historians to be the moment Jesus steps so far over the line he basically guarantees himself a cross.

By moving such a climactic incident to the beginning of the gospel, the writer of John invites us into a rather surreal ahistorical narrative space, a somewhat dreamlike reality where Jesus operates in a realm outside and apart from the real-world natural consequences of his words and actions.

And then there's the story itself. Frankly, John does it up big! The other three gospels dispatch with this same scene in 2-3 verses. John takes 10.

The other gospel writers don't have Jesus weaving a whip for himself.

The other gospel writers don't give us this animal parade of detail: sheep, and cattle and doves oh my!

The other gospel writers don't have Jesus spouting holy mysteries about his body being a temple.

And the other gospel writers don't have Jesus strutting away from the wreck he wrought without any apparent consequences.

John's does.

And they do because they are intent on showing us not just Jesus the incarnate Word, but Jesus the embodied foolishness of God.

Now, that's all well and good. But why does it matter that our holy fool Jesus does all this? What's the point?

Well, the point most certainly isn't the temple is wrong and Judaism is a corrupt religion that needs to be purified by Christ and Christians. Though there can be no doubt this text has been read that way far too often for far too long with devastating consequences. But that is not what's happening here.

Despite the gospel writer's use of "the Jews" to refer to Jesus's opponents throughout, this is a wholly Jewish world and Jesus is wholly Jewish. Born Jewish. Raised Jewish. Died Jewish. Rose Jewish. So again the point can't be the temple is corrupt institution representing a corrupt religion that needs to be purified by Christianity. Jesus even shows reverence for the Jewish temple as "my Father's house."

Rather the point is something more like monetizing religion to prey on folks' deepest desire to worship God is an abomination and must be met with the force and intensity and embodied resistance requisite to rectify the established modes of oppression.

And here, for this purpose, is where Jesus, the incarnate foolishness of God, an utterly holy fool, arrives on the scene. For the primary purpose of the holy fool is to manifest in themselves, to act out, to call attention to the corruption and disorder established in the system, manifest in the institution for so long no one even thinks to notice it anymore.

Of course, from the establishment point of view, a holy fool is a god-damned fool, one that enters a peaceful, orderly, perfectly ordinary situation and creates chaos because they simply do not know their place, do not know how to act, need to be taught manners.

But the holy fool knows, with that deeper knowledge, that truer knowledge, that clarifying foolishness of God that they are simply acting in accordance with what the injustice of the situation demands of them. They are, as Jesus does here, confronting the accepted offensiveness of a system of injustice with the pure and holy affront of who they are.

Their offense, then, Jesus's offense in this passage is to exist fully in a space that demands an explicit economics of scarcity. Their offense is to bring the full abundance of who they are, their amazing grace, into a place that demands they be just such and such sized and no bigger—into a place that insists this and that part are not welcome.

So, when Jesus stands in that temple with his homemade whip, tangled hair, spittle on his lips, dusted with wool and hair and feathers, surrounded by the mess he made, sweating and heaving for breath—when he stands there embedded in the accumulated pomp of that splendid institution with every judgmental, alarmed, dismissive eye of power upon him and declares “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” he's not just predicting his resurrection; he's not just giving some sort of mysteriously ambiguous accounting for his actions; he is justifying and upholding and blessing every justice warrior who has ever sweat and fought and split their blood literally or figuratively in the name of equity and abundance and love; and he is declaring everybody and every body as holy and good and more and more than enough as sacred beyond all measure, beyond all institutional splendor and institutional imperative that might rule otherwise; he is saying this,

this single human person is as much as, nay more, than any institution no matter how magnificent or well-endowed.

There is a world in those words - a world of grace upon grace - a world of life abundant.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

There is a world in those words.

A better world.

A fuller world.

My Lord, and my God, a beautiful world

A world that only fools may enter.

Amen.

Closing prompt for further discussion in breakout rooms:

Where do you see God's Foolishness breaking out in our world, in your own life?

Where is God's foolishness ascendent? And how do we get there?