



Lent and the Gospel of St John

An address for the Cosmic Mass on the first Sunday of Lent
10th February 2008 ● Rev Lukas

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And 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. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body. When 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.
John 2: 13-22

Good morning and welcome to our Cosmic Mass on this first Sunday of Lent.

The season of Lent commenced last week with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday, and the black cross which is placed on the forehead, is a reminder that from ashes we have come and to ashes we will return, that the basic element of our material bodies is the black mineral carbon. This mineral is lifted into a life form by spiritual forces and when the spirit life leaves at death, the body decomposes back to mineral elements.

The black represents the darkness of matter and it was into this darkness that Christ needed to enter, in order for humanity to be redeemed.

The cross, as we know, is a picture of the human physical form. And it is through Christ's entrance into this form that we are now enabled to develop I Am consciousness and to evolve into spiritualised beings.

The ancient Rosicrucians understood this great gift of Christ and used the symbol of a rose growing out of the black cross as a way to represent this redemptive process.

St John and Easter

Today I want to focus on the Johannine perspective of Lent, or should I say the perspective that we can glean from St John's Gospel. Just as the Rosicrucians summarised their understanding in a symbol, the significance of Easter is summarised by John in the first verses of his gospel. We know them very well, so I won't repeat them all. For today's purposes, though, the following verse summarises an important theme:

In him was life and the life was the light of the human being. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Meaning of the Word Lent

What does the season of Lent mean for us today? I have also wondered what the word 'lent' actually means. From my reading, most references seem to think that the word 'lent', means 'to lengthen' and refers to the fact that in spring the hours of sunlight increase; that is, the days begin to lengthen, after the darkness of winter. This of course pertains to the Northern Hemisphere's Lenten time.

The word 'lento' is a musical term, which indicates to play something slowly - somewhere between a Largo and an Adagio.

One dictionary that I consulted (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary On Historical Principles*) connects the word 'lent' with the sluggishness or slowness that results from a fiery fever. This idea of fieriness and fever brings to mind the term 'Spring fever'.

It is on this point of fieriness and fever that it becomes possible to enter into the Scripture reading we have just heard from John chapter 2, verses 13-22.

The Cleansing of the Temple

After Jesus had driven the animals and the traders out of the temple, we read:

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me."

The idea of being consumed by zeal is like being consumed by flames of fiery energy.

The Scripture the disciples remembered is Psalm 69, verse 9:

*...O God of Israel.
For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
That shame has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my brethren,
An alien to my mother's sons.
For zeal for thy house has consumed me,
And the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me.*

Being Consumed by Work

Can you recall a time when a project was before you and it took hold of your imagination: you worked at it for hours and for days, taking breaks to sleep and to eat, but always occupied with the work? Even when not doing the work, the mind continued to attend to it.

This sort of experience an artist may have when creating, or an author when writing or perhaps the work of a mother with an infant: dedicated, occupied, consumed with overwhelming interest in the work at hand.

The disciples saw that Jesus was consumed by zeal for the work of transforming human nature, transforming the temple.

Forty Days of Lent

Why is Lent forty days long, if you exclude the Sundays? The main instances of the number forty in the New Testament are the account of Christ's ordeal in the desert, fasting, praying and being tempted by the devil. This event is described in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke but not in John.

In John we have this picture of Jesus cleansing the temple. My sense is that this picture is the equivalent period of preparation from the Johannine perspective: a clearing out of the old, creating a space in preparation for the building of the new.

Christ in the Temple

This event is the first instance in John's gospel, of Christ in the temple. There are other instances. The second is in chapter 7, which I will say something about later, the third is in chapter 10 at the Portico of Solomon. The first instance probably took place in the outer court of the temple where traders were allowed to set up their stalls.

If we understand Lent to be a progressive movement from the outer temple into the inner sanctum of the temple, into the heart of the mystery of Golgotha, then we can view this event in the outer court as the beginning of that movement - that is, the beginning of Lent.

The Oxen and the Sheep

In the Temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers at their business. And now we read the first action that Jesus takes:

And making a whip of cords he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen out of the temple.

The first thing I notice is the vigour and the effort displayed by Jesus. This work of transforming our nature, is the Great Work, the Great Art, and it was this work that Jesus Christ was consumed by. The other aspect that is clear is that Jesus engaged his Will, he needed to, so that he could drive the animal Will out of the Temple. So this work of transformation requires us to engage our Will.

The Sentient Consciousness

The cultural era before the time of Christ was the Egyptian-Chaldean era. This culture developed under the influence of the sign of Taurus. The oxen in this story therefore could be an indication of this consciousness. Jesus then is removing an old consciousness from the temple. This was a consciousness relating to the Sentient Soul, where one is guided by one's senses only. An illustration of what is meant by this technical term 'sentient soul' is, perhaps, someone in their twenties living their life for the moment, following their need for sensation, going with the flow, simply wanting and being content with the experience of the senses. Now this is fine at an early stage of life, but it is a bit of a worry if it is the highest stage of consciousness that one achieves in life. The sentient soul consciousness was the highest stage achieved by the general population in those ancient times in Chaldea and Egypt.

The Intellectual Consciousness

The presence of sheep in the outer court could represent the Aries culture, which followed the Taurean era. The Aries culture is known as the Greco-Roman era. This of course was the age in which Christ was living. That culture concerned the development of the Intellectual Soul. This is a consciousness that searches for truth, and an understanding of oneself as an individual by using rational thought. In this culture the concept of the citizen emerged, philosophy and science had their beginnings.

There is a figure or character in John's Gospel, who I think illustrates this consciousness and that is Pilate. This intellectual soul consciousness is demonstrated when Pilate engages in a philosophical discussion with Jesus, and asks: What is truth? This is apparently how Socrates used to begin his discourses and debates, by asking a question and then proceeding to try to answer it with rational thinking.

But Jesus also drove all those with their sheep out of the temple, thus indicating that this consciousness was also not sufficient, and that Jesus was creating the space for something new to come into humanity. That newness of course includes, but is not limited to, what is developing in our present age that is the Consciousness Soul. This is a consciousness not

just of one's individuality in this material world but of oneself as a spiritual being in the cosmos.

This development requires the engagement of the Will. The character of Pilate again illustrates this. Later in John's gospel we read how Pilate did not engage his will against the pressure of the mob. He seemed to understand the truth of the situation but did not have the will to stand in that truth.

The words of the Lord's Prayer become meaningful here:

Heavenly Father ...thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the early verses of the Gospel of John we also read:

He gave power to become the children of God who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the human will, but of God.

The reference in this verse to birth in relation to the will of God, leads our thoughts to another character in John's gospel. This character also seems to embody the intellectual soul consciousness of the Greco-Roman era and this is Nicodemus. Following on from the cleansing of the temple, we read about Nicodemus coming to Jesus. Jesus tells him that he would not see the kingdom of God, the spiritual worlds, unless he was born anew. Nicodemus then begins an intellectual argument, and questions Jesus about the rationality of such a concept. Jesus tells him that the second birth involves being born into a consciousness of spirit. In the context of this address, we can understand this to mean a consciousness that experiences self as a spiritual being in the cosmos. That is the Consciousness Soul.

The Money Changers

Now we come to the second action of Jesus in the temple:

And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

If you have ever changed money you will know that it can be a costly exercise. There is a buying price and a selling price and it all gets quite complicated. The whole financial system operates that way, not just in currency trading. Everyone takes his or her cut of your money.

A currency trader of course, like any business, is simply offering a useful service. The service we offer in order to make a living, however, usually has strings attached. In dealing with others we usually start with the question: What is in it for me? Our self-interest generally comes first. Profit is important. This is the way we live our lives at this time.

Our current culture is generally not geared to selflessness. Selflessness is a rare thing, I imagine. In fact, I am not sure what a culture that incorporates selflessness would look like. All I know is that we need a self first in order to be selfless.

So what is this picture of Jesus pouring out the coins of the money-changers and overturning their tables indicating?

A self-orientated life is being over turned. Such a way of life is not going to be part of the new temple.

The Culture of the Waterman

This area of our development has to do with our feeling life, our hearts. We are working on that now of course, but as a cultural norm we will need to look to the next cultural era, that is the Age of Aquarius – a culture where selflessness will have been developed to a greater

degree. Our feeling life will be more refined than it is today, allowing brotherhood of humanity to be actually lived and experienced, rather than it being just a concept.

One of the better explanations I have read, of what such a culture will be like is that one will not be able to feel happy or content in their life if they are aware that another human being is suffering.

If we jump ahead to chapter 7 in John's gospel, to where Jesus is in the temple for a second time, we read:

On the last day of the feast the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."

The word translated as heart is actually not 'kardia' but 'koilia'. 'Kardia' is the Greek word that is usually translated as heart. The word 'koilia' refers more to the container aspect of the body, like the womb or belly for example. So here in chapter 7 is a picture of the human being as a container pouring out from itself, living water. This is the classic image of the Waterman, Aquarius, indicating a selflessness, which will create a new culture of brotherhood in the coming era.

The Tethered Doves

And now to the third action of Jesus:

And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."

The word translated as pigeon is 'peristera'. Now this word also means dove. For example earlier in John's gospel chapter 1 we read:

And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him."

The word 'peristera' in this verse is translated as dove. It does not read, "I saw the spirit descend as a pigeon". The poor old pigeons are a bit like the rodents of the avian world, whereas doves are portrayed as the innocent angels particularly the white ones.

So, for today's purpose, let's change the picture in the outer court to one of doves being tethered or caged and used as a commodity.

Now at this point, and in response to the dove traders, Jesus uses speech for the first time during the temple cleansing. This indicates to me that we are entering the realm of thinking. We have moved from the will, through feeling and now into thinking.

Freedom and Spiritual Thinking

This picture of the bound or caged doves can indicate that thinking is being misused or not used at all, that it is bound to the material world. When our thinking is freed and becomes spiritualised then we are enabled to enter into communion with Spirit. Some say it is through spiritual thinking that we attain the only true freedom that is available to us at present. This freedom comes because no longer are we bound to a consciousness of the material world, our consciousness can now fly freely and commune with spirit.

This state of consciousness, a free communing with spirit, is what humanity in general will hopefully have achieved in the coming cultural eras.

Through the deed of Golgotha, Christ has made the transformation of our being and the attainment of freedom possible. Golgotha, as John tells us, means 'the place of the skull', the place of thinking.

This story from John's gospel creates for us a setting and purpose for the beginning of this Lenten season. Each year at this time we have another opportunity to renew our efforts and our zeal in the work of transformation.

Jesus began by creating the space and conditions necessary so that the great deed of Golgotha could be lived and enacted - just as we can now create the space and conditions within our own being to enable a greater experience of the reality and power of Golgotha.

So shall it be.

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