

1 Cor 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On March 10th 2003, ten days before “Bush 43” invaded Iraq in his father’s tank tracks, the lead singer of a country band from Austin, Texas, called the Dixie Chicks, stood on the stage of the Shepherd’s Bush Empire and said, “just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” The remark was reported in the Guardian and shortly afterwards picked up in the press in the United States.

Although you might not have heard of them, the Dixie Chicks were mainstream celebrities in the states, playing at the Superbowl and reliably selling more than 10 million copies of each album they released. Following those remarks at the Empire, however, Texans and other Americans boycotted their music, burnt their albums, and crushed heaps of CDs with bulldozers. KKCS Radio in Colorado Springs suspended two DJs for playing their music. People even sent death threats to the singers. (Nobody seems to have mentioned that the Bushes actually come from Kennebunkport, Maine, which is about as far from Texas as you can get without actually going vegetarian.)

Gradually, through positive political action and works of charity, the group built public support up again. Finally, after three years in the wilderness, they had put together a new album and were ready to release the first single from it. Did they offer an abject apology for the offence they had caused? Not exactly: the single was a track called “Not Ready To Make Nice”, and the chorus ran,

*I'm not ready to make nice
I'm not ready to back down
I'm still mad as hell and I don't have time to go 'round and 'round and 'round
It's too late to make it right
I probably wouldn't if I could
'Cause I'm mad as hell
Can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should.*

What, to paraphrase Tertullian, has Austin to do with Jerusalem? We’ve just heard the story that, with a rather sanitised view, we sometimes call “the cleansing of the Temple”, but I bet it was a right old mess when he’d finished. Christ’s anger puts us in mind of the wrath and condemnation of God, but anger isn’t very palatable at the moment. “Day of wrath and doom impending, [...] heaven and earth in ashes ending”, begins the Dies Iræ that we heard as we came in – and the sequence was removed from the Roman funeral rites some years ago “for pastoral reasons”.

There might be doctrinal difficulties too, of course: if we want to hold together the full divinity of Christ with the view that God cannot suffer or change, then this little outburst of zeal might make us uncomfortable. But if this is a problem, Good Friday is going to be a nightmare! Christ crucified is foolishness indeed to such philosophy. We must allow Jesus his angry outburst in the Temple as readily as we feel for Him when he weeps over Lazarus and Jerusalem.

What strikes me about John’s account of the cleansing of the Temple is where he places it in his gospel: the synoptics time this incident immediately after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, a kind of purification rite before the liturgy of that last week. (In fact Mark has Jesus popping his head round the Temple door the night before, realising it’s a bit late, and coming back in the morning!) But John puts it right at the beginning, the first act that Jesus performs with his own hands. So far, He has received baptism from John; called the first Apostles; and (under protest) turned water into wine. Now we see Him active, purposeful, militant, striding through the melée of cows and sheep, startling the doves into

the air, flinging coins all over the floor, skittling tables, and scattering the crowd. I'd have run a mile! I wonder if, for John, this is a statement of Jesus' intent for His whole ministry? If the Kingdom is the world turned upside-down, if nothing is what we would want or expect, then this image of disruption and chaos even in the Temple, rings true: a few tables are going to be turned. John's making it clear right at the beginning that Jesus is not ready to make nice: He's not going to do what it is that *we* think He should. God's foolishness trumps our wisdom.

The difficulty with mission statements is in how we interpret them. The obvious conclusion that Jesus didn't want commerce in places of worship seems improbable and doesn't seem to have occurred to the mediæval church, nor to Cathedral Chapters in our own times. I'm not convinced it's a clear justification for losing one's temper, either, since, although He could be quite rude to His mother, Jesus doesn't seem to have made a habit of flying into rages: His anger is but for a moment, as the Psalmist says. So I wonder if it tells us more about His own developing sense of His mission (perhaps not as fully-formed as John's gospel sometimes suggests), and about how God's grace is given to us.

"I'm not ready to make nice, not ready to back down": I wonder what I would have done in the position the Dixie Chicks found themselves in? They weren't ashamed of their anger, as I am of mine; they weren't going to be cowed into an apology they didn't mean just because the press stirred up a furore. They didn't feel bound by popular expectation: instead, they showed through their work what really mattered to them. They raised money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina when Mr Bush failed to act; they played at the "Rock the Vote" concert and joined the "Vote for Change" tour; they campaigned for recognition of gay and lesbian relationships – in short, they turned their anger into action.

The people responsible for the Temple quite naturally want to know why Jesus has made such a mess and upset everyone like this, on what authority? And though they can't yet understand His answer, the authority Jesus gives the Jews (and His disciples) is infinitely greater than political conviction or gut feeling: it is none other than His own resurrection. What more decisive sign could there be! This eschatological justification is a valuable reminder that Jesus' violent outburst in the Temple was a one-off: he wasn't the sort of revolutionary some were looking for. If John is telling us that it was programmatic, he means that in the same eschatological frame – the Temple that really matters is the body of the incarnate God, and the anger that really matters is anger converted to action. If we see here the day of God's Wrath, brandishing His whip over the heads of the sheep and cattle, remember that we'll soon see the tables turned – the whip in a soldier's hand, and Our Lord tied to a post like an animal. And if we see Christ's hands put to use first to turn over these traders' tables, remember that the last thing John will show them doing freely is taking a piece of bread, dipping it in wine, and handing it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.

I confess that the political radicalism of people like the Dixie Chicks appeals to me – tempts me, even. I certainly admire their determination to stand by what they felt, but in the end, they aren't really that radical, and anyway theirs is not the model I'm called to follow. What we are called to do, God willing, is to come to the altar, the table that turns the tables, where the crucified one lives among us; where the rejected one feeds us; where the condemned one saves us; where our death-dealing anger is transformed into life-giving action. What are you condemning yourself for this Lent? What do you wish you could drive out of people? Bring those things with you to this altar. And maybe you will taste the lash in that shard of flesh; maybe there is gall in the cup's blood-kiss. This is real radicalism: God won't do what it is we think He should. He won't be put off by the stall we set out, and the deals we offer, and the temples we spend years building. We are Christ's body: God knows us, and still He loves us! He won't back down: he *will* raise us up. Amen.