

April 17, 2011
The National Presbyterian Church

Prayer, Prophets, and Profits

Matthew 21:1-17

Rev. Patrick Willson

As we approach Holy Week and the suffering and death of Jesus, we wonder why Jesus could so aggravate people that they should want to kill him. Reading Matthew's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his actions around the Temple in Jerusalem should make the matter clear.

As Matthew tells the story Jesus entered Jerusalem as if he owned the place, he walked through the Temple as if it belonged to him, which, of course, is Matthew's theological point. Whatever that entry into Jerusalem might have looked like in the first place and whatever the meaning was of Jesus' actions around the Temple, Matthew is not so much interested in showing us a videotape or recounting a carefully calibrated

history as he is to announce Jesus' rule as God's chosen one.

At the very beginning of his gospel—chapter one, verse one—Matthew told us Jesus is the son of David, and now this son of David comes into Jerusalem to claim his throne and his sovereignty, and the crowds sing their acclaim, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” is a greeting worthy of a king. Problem is, Jerusalem already has a king or actually a pair of them: King Herod in Jerusalem and the Emperor Augustus in Rome. To talk of a Davidic king, a “Son of David,” inevitably stirs controversy.

If you read the Scriptures regularly you have undoubtedly discovered how the Scriptures speak to us differently at different times of our lives. The words do not change but we change as we grow in experience and circumstances change. We become available to hear fresh messages and deeper meanings.

This year reading Matthew's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem I sympathized as never before with this donkey. Think of it: here is this donkey, minding his own business, going about his own donkey-ing way of doing whatever donkeys do, and someone points and says, “The LORD has need of him,” and he is whisked off to the capital city and thrust into controversy.

As a matter of fact the donkey can't avoid controversy. Matthew's readers would recognize the

donkey as another emblem of royalty, and to make certain we don't miss the point Matthew braids the words from the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Zechariah:

"Tell the daughter of Zion, [the Temple was located on Mount Zion]

Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey."

A donkey is a ride fit for a king.

If we knew how to read our Scriptures right, Matthew believes, we would recognize who Jesus is in these episode of his entry into the city and his visit to the temple. As it is, we are likely to ask along with all the people of Jerusalem: "Who is this?"

Matthew tells us: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." For Matthew, Jesus is more than a prophet, but he is not less than a prophet.

This talk of prophets can be a bit confusing but confusion about prophets points us to the controversy Jesus created in Jerusalem that finally rose to such murderous proportions.

When I served as Interim Pastor of New Providence Church in Maryville, Tennessee I preached on the prophet Jeremiah and his conflicts with Hananiah, the official court prophet of the king of Israel. In the prophet Jeremiah's time there were prophets and there were prophets, wise prophets and foolish prophets, prophets with irritating words (like Jeremiah) and prophets with comforting words (like Hananiah).

Worshippers were amused because among the first families of New Providence Church were the Profitts, the family who had started the Profit's department stores through the mid-South. I had never thought how the sermon might **sound**, but the Profitts—that is, the several members of the Profit family—were of good humor about it all.

A similar confusion of homonyms occurs in the lesson from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew repeatedly cites the prophets—Isaiah, Zechariah and Jeremiah—meanwhile the merchants of the Temple area are citing their profits, the proceeds from doing their business in the precincts of the Temple.

The money changers and sellers of doves were necessary for the operation of the temple, and other rabbis, we might even say other prophets, had criticized them for their corrupt practices of exchanged and inflated prices for doves, the offering of the poor, but surrounding the temple there were all kinds of shops and businesses going on that depended upon people coming to the Temple for their profits.

This was the week of Passover. What Mardi Gras is for the economy of New Orleans, what spring break is for Fort Lauderdale, so Passover was for Jerusalem. Passover was a solemn religious holiday, no doubt about it, but it was also enormously profitable because of the tourist trade. Pilgrims came from everywhere to the Temple.

Jesus walks through the Temple upsetting all of that, and the merchants are pointing to the bottom line. They're asking, "Who is this?" and the crowds are shouting, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee," and the merchants say, "We don't like the way this prophet is cutting into our profit."

Can you see why nice, reasonable people might want to get rid of Jesus? When it comes to property values, when it comes to doing business, when it comes to the matter of profits, religion shouldn't interfere, should it? After all, we have to pay attention to the bottom line.

When I left Williamsburg Presbyterian Church to come to National Presbyterian Church one of my Associate Pastors advised me, "Just don't talk about politics or religion." Well, we don't want to stir controversy.

People say the church should be run like a business, which is a reasonable thing to say as long as you know what the business of the church is. Jesus also pays attention to a bottom line. We see that right here in what he says. Upsetting the merchandising of God's Temple, Jesus announces,

"It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';
but you are making it a den of robbers."

That's the bottom line, or at least part of it:
"My house shall be called a house of prayer." Prayer,
not profit, not proficiency, not privilege, not

professionalism -- prayer. That constitutes the house of God. That's Matthew quoting Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah.

As if that were not enough to highlight Jesus' conflict with the profits of the temple—that's P-R-O-F-I-T-S—Matthew points to the rest of the bottom line as he observes, "The blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he cured them."

We hear so much of that sort of thing in the gospels it doesn't seem at all unusual or strange—unless we stop to think about it: what are the blind and the lame doing around the Temple? They can't go there! How did they get into this story? They don't belong here.

The Bible says so: didn't David himself speak of Mount Zion saying, "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house" (2 Sam 5:8). The book of Leviticus has a long list: "no one who has a blemish may draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long" and the list goes on and on (Leviticus 21:18).

The merchants of the Temple would have agreed: The blind and lame should not be there. All these unattractive outcasts hanging around the Temple are bad for business.

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City has a small night shelter for about a dozen homeless people and because they have a soup kitchen and allow these people to use their toilets, about another half dozen homeless sleep on the

church's steps. Well, that's nothing unusual; lots of downtown churches have shelters and soup kitchens.

But wait: this is Fifth Avenue! Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is five blocks north of Saks Fifth Avenue, just a block north across the street from Gucci, a block south from the Prada store and two blocks south from Van Cleef & Arpels, Bulgari and Tiffany, men and women are sleeping on the steps of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Need I mention the businesses complained? New York City took the church to court. *The New York Post* ran an editorial with the headline, "Presbyterians for Vagrancy." I imagine the Jerusalem papers the Monday morning after Palm Sunday: "Jesus for Blindness and Lameness."

Can you begin to see why people might have wanted to get rid of Jesus? Business is business.

When the prophets affect the profits, the profits go after the prophets.

When Matthew casually observes, "The blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he cured them," he is not casually telling us who came to church that morning, he is announcing the Lord has come to his Temple to claim it, and the day foreseen by the prophet Isaiah has dawned when God announces,

these I will bring to my holy mountain and
make them joyful in my house of prayer.

The king has come to claim his kingdom and
his house.

In Birmingham, Alabama I got to be good friends with Rabbi Steve Jacobs. We were both about the same age, we both liked Mexican food, enjoyed theological conversation: we hit it off. In addition to being rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, a synagogue located a few blocks from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Steve occasionally taught in the University's history department. One summer I took the course he offered on the Holocaust. Steve is a big, gregarious guy and was always a big hit with the history students.

One day after class a bunch of us stood around talking. One student, a pretty, twentyish young woman asked shyly, "Rabbi Jacobs, your class is so fascinating, and I have been interested in the things you say about Judaism, would I be allowed to come to your synagogue for services?"

Steve turned to the young woman and smiled. "Temple Emanu-El is right down here on Highland Avenue. Across the top of our building," he said, "it is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.'" That's all he said, other conversations began. The student stood there looking puzzled and uncertain.

"Uh, yes," she said, "I understand, but I'm a Christian, you see, and I didn't know, I mean, is it okay, can I come to your synagogue?"

Steve smiled at her again and explained very carefully: "Across the top of Temple Emanu-El it is

written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.' It's from the prophet Isaiah."

The young woman stood very still. Everyone was quiet for a moment. Here she was, asking an honest, polite question and he wouldn't give her a straight answer. But then, it sank in and you could see the recognition rise on her face. Great, ancient walls were cracking and crumbling inside her. "Oh," she whispered, "and Jesus said that too, didn't he? 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.'"

Steve nodded, "Yes, he did."

She smiled, nodded her head and walked away, and as she went, I heard her say once more, just to herself, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."

Steve wasn't just trying to be difficult, though Steve could be very difficult. He was bearing witness: it's not my house, it's not mine to say who may come, that has already been determined by the One whose house this is and who announced unmistakably: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, DC 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800