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Commodified Life (John 2. 13-25)

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Lent is the season of preparation for resurrection, new life by way of the Cross. We are journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem, remembering and repenting what stymies our participation in his mercy, generosity, compassion. We've been discovering that part of what gets in our way are habits of thought, patterns of heart and mind that keep us separate from God and others, from our own deepest self. Stress, complaint, resentment, blame, self-justification, criticism, envy, comparison, grasping ... 'thoughts' you may recognise – I certainly do!

So far, in this series of Lenten reflections, I've been inviting you to explore some of your own persistent patterns – stories you tell, obsessive or repetitive thoughts that keep certain themes, people, upsets at the centre of your life; inviting us to wonder how we might be differently by offering our minds to be changed, renewed so that we become freer, more peaceable, more receptive to reality.

But it's not just we as individuals who have persistent patterns which may need '*metanoia*', repentance. There are also larger cultural patterns, habits (if you like) of a collective mind, assumptions about reality we all operate from which can be death-dealing, merciless, rivalistic and scarcity producing. These common 'thoughts' affect us powerfully through economic and political arrangements and incentives, the ethos of institutions we work in, the organisation of communal space and time, lifestyle expectations and media imagery. Just as with our personal 'thoughts', these cultural thoughts can also work to separate us from God, from others and ourselves. Yet they can be difficult to name, and even more difficult for us, simply as individuals, to 'repent' of. They constitute what the liberation theologians used to call 'structural

sin' – and Jesus, I believe, was just as concerned with them as with our personal demons. Lent is a time for acknowledging them too, exploring how a community such as ours on its way to Jerusalem might participate in their transformation. Today's gospel offers insight into one of our culture's endemic structural sins – the commodification of life.

The story of Jesus' cleansing the temple is oddly placed in John's gospel. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it's narrated straight after Jesus' final, triumphal entry into Jerusalem – a subversive act guaranteed to provoke the authorities, a catalyst for his arrest, trial and crucifixion. John, by contrast, places this event almost at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, signalling from the outset that in Jesus a new access to God is being given through 'the temple of his body'. But what Jesus objects to seems consistent across all the gospels: 'Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' (John 2.16); 'It is written: "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers"' (Matt. 21.13; Mk. 11. 17; Lk. 19. 46).

Now, the animals being sold, the money being changed – this wasn't just some random farmers' market. It was all in the service of worship, since pilgrims to Jerusalem needed to purchase beasts for sacrifice and to buy them, not with contaminated Roman coinage, but with ritually clean temple coinage. One commentator suggests, then, that Jesus' concern isn't the commerce itself, but the location: 'This business has to be done: cattle, sheep, and doves must be purchased for sacrifice ... The problem, as often in critical situations, is "location, location, location"'. And the commentator goes on to claim that business is not sinful – but it's disrespectful to do it in God's house: 'the situation is outrageous: commerce in a Holy Place'.¹

Now this seems to me spectacularly to miss the point. Not only is it dualistic. After all, if this commerce in service of worship is OK, then surely it's OK to conduct it

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 143-144.

in the sight of God. It also misses the real reference of Jesus' action. The scriptural quotation used as the punch line for all the synoptic gospel accounts of this event, 'you are making [my house] a den of robbers', comes from the words of the prophet Jeremiah who has been told by God to stand in the temple gate, warning:

'Here the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord ... Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place'. Notice 'Let me dwell with you'. Says Jeremiah on God's behalf, 'if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place'. But, instead, 'Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail' – you steal, murder, make offerings to Baal, and then 'come and stand before me in this house ... and say, "We are safe!" Has this house ... become a den of robbers in your sight?' (Jer. 7. 1-11) This is the prophetic speech in the background of Jesus' prophetic action.

Jesus is denouncing the hollowness of the temple worship of his day. If you act unjustly, then you are not letting God dwell with you – you are pushing God out. And so your false worship, turns you into a thief – attempting to steal, to swindle from God what cannot be purchased by your pious words and your commercially obtained sacrificial offerings. 'Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' Stop pretending you can buy what is only ever gift, the gift of God's presence with you if you are able to receive it.

And here is where these words convict us as a people. We too have turned God's house into a marketplace. There is a whole world given us to enjoy – we did not create it, we are woeful at stewarding it. Yet we buy and sell it, as if it belongs to us, as if we own it. And we do the same thing to ourselves. We speak too often as though human life and talent are commodities – not so much gifts to be enjoyed, shared and expended in delighted abandon, but marketable *assets*, human *resources*

in which we need to *invest*, whose *productivity* we must *manage*, whose *returns* we must conserve, stockpile, secure against an uncertain future. Notice the pervasiveness of the metaphors! We over-work, many of us, in institutions deformed by an economic model more interested in financial growth, than in creativity, learning, social and ecological well-being; we over-consume, many of us, to compensate for lives hollowed out by being treated as means to some other end – including the end of a fat pension.

I am raising complex issues here. And I know that we need some organised means of exchange and that a labourer is worthy of their hire. I'm not saying that all property is theft (though it might be); or that planning for retirement is bad. What I am suggesting is that we are caught up in a conception, a *thought*, a collection of metaphors that lead us to imagine our selves, our time, our purpose in very particular ways; and these thoughts are operative not just decorative. They sustain whole taken-for-granted systems which affect how we work, how we are rewarded, what gets valued, who gets attention, how power is exercised, how we experience and live our lives. And much of this is alienating – it distances us from our own deep needs and truth, from more creative, adventurous, thankful possibilities for living. It distances us from our competitors and rivals, and so often makes it difficult for us to give our time and attention as we would wish – caring for family and friends, taking time to delight in the world. It nourishes in us a frame of mind that renders us less present to God – who is with us only ever as gift. And if it's alienating in all these ways, then it's sin.

So what might repentance, *metanoia* look like in the face of this? A beginning, I think, is simply to *notice* this repetitive, pervasive 'thought' in our culture, to attend to its impact. What doesn't happen because we are caught, collectively, by this way of conceiving, imagining, structuring life? What openings exist to imagine some other ways of being – in our universities, hospitals, schools, offices? A second step might be to explore what might strengthen in us an alternative possibility. In this context,

the practise of a Sabbath may be profoundly subversive and liberating – imagine, a whole day, without ‘producing’ anything, not checking emails, but simply intentionally resting in the Lord, delighting in the gift of life, letting God dwell with you. If that sounds scary, then you know you’re onto something! And if we are serious about repenting of this structural sin, the commodification of life, then in the end we might need to practise a little civil disobedience – just as happened in the civil rights movement, Rosa Parks sitting in the front of the bus. In one situation of systematic overwork I experienced, I suddenly realised that by soldiering on I was colluding in perpetuating injustice. Did I dare just say no? Did I dare refuse to participate? Well, I had some leverage, but many in our community are too vulnerable to risk their positions, their livelihoods. But are we all? And do some of us need to take a stand, in part on behalf of those who cannot for themselves?

It’s a radical invitation, this Lenten journey, and it’s not just a private matter. It’s a radical invitation ... this preparation for resurrection, by way of the Cross.