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## **Teach Us To Pray: The Cleansing of the Temple (John 2: 13–23)**

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Tonight is the third in our Lenten series, *Teach Us To Pray*. As Sarah has reminded us, the aim of this series is not so much to suggest methods of prayer, but to explore the dynamics of ‘radical, transformative, generous, hospitable prayer’. In the past two weeks Sarah has spoken about intention and attention in prayer. Tonight I want to explore what the lectionary reading – *The Cleansing of the Temple* (John 2:13–23) – might have to offer on the dynamics of prayer.

Unlike the other gospel writers, who place the *Cleansing of the Temple* at the end of Jesus’ ministry, in John’s Gospel, this event comes at the beginning, right after the wedding at Cana when Jesus turned the water into wine. Perhaps John is less interested in temporal accuracy than in highlighting the symbolic meanings of these events. So what does the juxtaposition of the two events – the miracle at Cana and the Cleansing of the Temple – have to teach us about radical and transformative prayer. Both contain elements of purification and transformation. It is the water used for ritual purification that Jesus transforms into wine at Cana, while his dramatic and provocative act of cleansing the temple not only challenges the abuses of purification rituals, including the sacrificial system, but takes us beyond them, as do his words about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple. All suggest radical transformation. As someone has quipped, turning water into wine certainly involves more than changing the labels on the bottles – both for God and for us.

When Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (v. 19), the Jews did not understand him, as they were still – understandably – thinking of a literal temple. And his own disciples only understood in hindsight that he was talking about his own death and resurrection. The early church took the metaphor further as they came to understand that the creator of the world does not live in ‘a house made with hands’ (Acts 17:4) but in the hearts of his people. Both individually (1 Corinthians 6:19) and corporately (2 Corinthians:6; Ephesians: 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5), we are temples of the Holy Spirit.

John O’Donohue, in his beautiful book, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger to Belong*, illuminates this image. He writes, “Deep below the personality and outer image” – and we could add ‘our awareness’ – “the soul is continuously at prayer ... The most vital and creative prayer is always happening within us even though we never fully hear it. Now and again we catch the echoes of the inner music of prayer” (p. 198). I hear echoes here of Paul’s words: “His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God... Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:16, 26). Deep within us, in the heart of the temple, the sanctuary lamp continues to burn; the union with God, that we both seek and avoid, is already happening, though we are not always aware of it.

Perhaps all we need to do is remember that. Thomas Merton seems to confirm this:

In prayer, we discover what we already have.

You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realise you are already there.

We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it.

Everything has been given us in Christ. All we need to do is experience what we already possess. (Thomas Merton, in Richard Hauser, *In His Spirit*).

The crunch is in the last line: "All we need to do is experience what we already possess". But how to do that? From time to time we do experience this mystery. But coming home to ourselves, to others and to God involves a lifelong journey that is frequently challenging. One of the liberating insights I have had in recent years is the importance of accepting, trusting, even embracing, the ebbs and flows of experience. There will be harvest times when we feel our lives are coming together as they should and we feel connected to God. And there will be times when we won't feel like that, when scarcity rather than abundance is our experience.

Starting from where we are, as Merton suggests, is essential for authentic prayer. We need to pray as we can, not as we can't. And sometimes that means bringing the mess of our uncertainty and anguish to God. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane went through an agonising struggle before he reached the place where he could say, "Into your hands I commend my spirit". Apparently over 50% of the Book of Psalms is lament – a form of prayer that allows the expression of our distress, even anger, about what is happening in us or around us. *De profundis* – "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice" (Psalm 6:4). In other words, "When are you going to hear my prayer?" Or as I read somewhere recently, "I call to you, O God, and all I get is your answering machine".

This form of prayer can be an essential part of our journey of transformation. As Sarah and Neil point out in a paper called *Practising the Vocation of Ageing* (EREMOS, April 2018), "To struggle with anger, resentment, fear and despair to the point where resistance is finally spent and the broken heart opens more deeply and compassionately, is crucial in the journey of completion and relinquishment". And the call to integration and surrender is not confined to old age, but begins at whatever age we are, although we might be more open to it from mid-life on, or when our hearts have been broken in some way.

This brings me to the central metaphor of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple – the encapsulation of the Easter Story, the Paschal Mystery. *Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.* What can we learn from this about the dynamics of prayer? You will notice in what follows that I use the word 'dismantle' rather than 'destroy' – I feel it better matches the experience I am speaking of. Besides it is less brutal. It also allows for a play on words, leading to another metaphor that is helpful to our understanding of this process. To dismantle is to remove one's mantle or cloak. So, to dismantle may be about removing – or being stripped of – the social disguises or trappings of office or protection.

So how does dismantling happen? There are experiences in life that unsettle us to a greater or lesser degree. These can be ordinary life transitions, for example moving out of paid work into retirement, or from independent living to an aged care facility. We all experience losses

of different kinds – loss of relationships, places, health, independence, or loss of face – the experience of humiliation or exposure on some level or another. I am sure you can add to the list. Sometimes these experiences more than unsettle us – they undo us, they take us into the liminal space of dismantling.

There can also be unexpected crises that ambush us, challenging all our beliefs and dreams about how life ought to be. Like Humpty Dumpty, we can have such a great fall that we don't know how we will ever come together again. Perhaps our fall is not so much about humiliation, as a sense of betrayal by those closest to us – by family, friends or a community that has been like family. Although painful, all these experiences can be invitations to become more than we thought we could be – more compassionate, more loving, more generous in spirit and more engaged in life.

There is also the more intentional dismantling of the false self that is part of prayer – where we surrender our sense of who we are to God – with our agendas of power and control, desire for security and affection and status. Richard Rohr is fond of saying “Only suffering and prayer are strong enough to decentralise the ego ... Every movement towards union [with God] will feel like a loss of self-importance and self-control” (*What the Mystics Know*, p. 52). Perhaps that is why we both want and resist God. We want God but on our terms, to support our agendas. It takes time to learn that true freedom only comes from surrender.

Whether through prayer or through life's challenges – in my experience it is a life-saving and life-giving mixture of both – we are being dismantled to create a more hospitable space, open to finding God in places and situations we would perhaps prefer to have avoided.

Thomas Merton taught his monks to “enter deeply into the school of life and to consider their whole life as a meditation, a learning from God, a school of wisdom” (*Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton*, p. 15). As Christian Wiman puts it, “If God is not in the very fabric of existence for you, if you do not find him (or miss him!) in the very details of your daily life, then religion is just one more way to commit spiritual suicide” (Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet*). God is not an accessory!

What is being dismantled are walls that defend against and exclude other people, God or parts of ourselves that we can't accept. It is not a comfortable process to let go our illusions of who we think we are and to get in touch with our fallibility, vulnerability and longing. Remember that time in the Garden of Eden, when God calls, “Where are you?” and Adam replies, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Gen 3:8–10). Perhaps, like Adam we fear being seen, exposed in our nakedness. Perhaps we fear getting in touch with our shadow side, the dark side that erupts from time to time in our life. Or perhaps our trust has been wounded by our personal history. The good news is that allowing ourselves to face these things, receiving all our life from God, can in itself be profoundly healing.

Prayer dissolves the walls of the heart and opens up a larger, more hospitable space. Of course, we can also use prayer to thicken our defenses, strengthen our sense of entitlement and superiority over others. Remember the Pharisee's 'prayer': “I thank you that I am not like other men, especially that publican there ...”, before proceeding to catalogue all his religious practices. Real prayer brings us home to ourselves, to other people and to God. In

this sense, it is a way of participating in the only drama that really matters in the end; our own life, which is part of God's Larger Story. O'Donohue reminds us that "It takes a lifetime's work to belong fully to your own life ... Prayer is the bridge between longing and belonging" (*Eternal Echoes*, p. 213).

The following words from Richard Rohr take up the house—temple metaphor to suggest the journey prayer takes us from a defended, separate self to a connected, hospitable self – the journey of spiritual awakening:

To pray is to build your own house. To pray is to discover someone else is within your house. To pray is to recognise that it is not your own house at all. To keep praying is to have no house to protect because there is only one House. And that house is everybody's home (*What the Mystics Know*, p. 4).

This is the journey of a life-time. In every sense of the word. There is no comprehensive insurance policy to protect us against mishaps – or even a guaranteed itinerary. And it can be a wild ride. I will close with a prayer poem by Noel Davis who rather delightfully captures that mixture of both resisting and desiring God, referred to earlier. The fear of being overwhelmed or dismantled is there, but the desire for being taken out of his depth, deep into the heart of God is even deeper. Perhaps you will recognise some of yourself in this.

**Prayer:**

*I stand beside the river of commitment to You  
and prepare to wade into the shallows.  
Seems the most sensible thing to do.  
I roll up my longings to my knees  
Should be high enough  
but before I know it  
the water's up around my middle.  
That's always the way  
when I get involved with You.  
Never one for limits.  
There's always the excitement of something new  
and the fear of what might happen when You're about.*

*I feel the waters rising even higher  
And that terrifies me.  
Time to bail out or at least to reconsider  
like I've done so many times before.  
But take me out of my depth, dear God,  
deeper into the heart of You  
before I bolt again.*

- Noel Davis in *Heart Gone Walkabout*