

John 2 v13-22

There was once a woman called Emily Post. She was born sometime in the early 1870's and died in 1960. What made her famous was a book she wrote called 'Etiquette'. This book, which ran to ten editions, taught people how to get along 'politely' in society! Some of what she said was good. For example, how many of us have ever been to a posh restaurant and been confused by the array of different knives, forks and spoons!

Which knife / fork / to use first, that's the question! Well, Mrs Post wrote, "Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter which fork you use!" However, she also wrote (not only in terms of table manners, it seems!), "To do exactly as your neighbours do is the only sensible rule."

Someone else said this, in another way: "When in Rome, do as the Roman's do!" However, I don't know about you, but that doesn't necessarily seem very wise advice to me. Nor, in fact, does it sound very Jesus-like.

But isn't it the case that, over the years (centuries even!) the church has given us a picture of a Jesus who is quiet and calm and reserved? The Jesus who was so meek and mild that it's difficult to imagine anyone getting so angry at him as to want to kill him! But the picture of Jesus as 'meek and mild' is only half the picture, as we hear from our Gospel verses today. Here we have a picture of Jesus we don't see very often. It's the angry Jesus, the loud Jesus, the not so meek-and-mild Jesus.

Let me set the scene for you. It's Passover time. That's the holiday (holy-day) celebrated in the spring, reminding the people of God's deliverance from slavery in the land of Egypt, and of God's fierce judgement, 'passing-over' the homes of God's people that had been marked with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. It's a time of unleavened bread, lamb and herbs. It's a time of sacrificial lambs, and pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, to offer prayer.

But it is more than evident that the sight that greets Jesus there that day, as he and his disciples arrive to prepare to observe Passover, angers him greatly. Verse 14 says that, in the Temple courts, Jesus finds traders, "Selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money." The word 'courts' means the outer courtyards of the Temple, rather than the 'inner sanctum', so to speak. In fact – and importantly for our understanding of this gospel story – the temple courtyards was the place reserved for the 'gentiles' to worship. The Gentiles, even though they weren't Jews, still wanted to worship God, but they were not able to go into the inner temple; being separated by a large curtain. When we get to the point in the Easter story, when the curtain is torn in two, remember it, because it means that now we can now all worship God equally.

But, we read that, in the place of the gentiles (that is, the non-Jews who, nevertheless, wanted to worship God but had not gone through the ritual to become Jews), the space reserved for them to worship had been taken-up with a whole variety of stalls, selling all sorts of commodities – especially related to the Passover ritual of sacrifice – and those changing money. Indeed, pilgrims – Jews and non-Jews

alike – came from foreign lands far away, and they needed to exchange their ‘coin’ into Temple currency.

After all, on their coins (if they lived within the Roman Empire) bore the image of Caesar (a graven image which contravened the second commandment), and it would be next to blasphemous to offer these to God. In addition to changing their money, they would need to buy animals for sacrifice. I guess that none of this was bad in itself – to an extent the traders were providing an essential service to those who desired to make themselves ‘right’ before God. But, on the other hand, the traders were so many and took up so much space; they were making it impossible for the gentiles to worship God. What had begun with the intention of providing a service, had in fact, become a disservice! And Jesus sees this.

There is probably more to it as well.

It is probable that the moneychangers were including a very hefty (exorbitant even!) exchange-rate for their service. It all smacks of these traders making large profits from the religious needs of the ‘faithful’. So, in his righteous anger, Jesus is acting against the double injustice that is, firstly, preventing the non-Jewish people from worshipping God and, secondly, cheating the worshippers by charging unfair exchange-rates. In his words and in his actions – in his anger – Jesus is rebelling against unjust practices that are preventing people getting close to God in worship. Is it the case, then, that God calls us to be ‘rebels’ too – that God calls us to do the opposite of “When in Rome, do as the Roman’s do!”

Do you remember the WWJD logo, that was all the rage ages ago? A man walked into a gift shop that sold religious items. Near the cash-register there was a display of baseball caps bearing the logo ‘WWJD?’ He was puzzled over what these letters could mean, so he asked the person behind the counter.

She replied that the letters of the logo stood for ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ and was meant to inspire people not to make rash decisions, but rather to imagine – and emulate – what Jesus would do if they found themselves in a particular situation. The man thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, I’m sure Jesus wouldn’t pay £15.00 for one of those caps!”

So, there’s the question! What would Jesus do? Our Gospel verses today show us that, sometimes, Jesus ‘went against the grain’. Sometimes Jesus stood-up (for), spoke-out against the unfair practices / attitudes of his day. Sometimes, Jesus was a rebel!

Now, perhaps we don’t hear this idea very often (or not often enough!). The word ‘rebel’ usually carries negative connotations with it. Rebelling against society; rebelling against parents, rebelling against God. And it is usual, perhaps, to ‘lump’ all these together and say that rebelling is, generally, bad. - Well, let’s think about that for a moment.

Is it possible to be a rebel – and be a Christian? That’s a question! And it seems that the answer is “Yes”! It seems that we can (and should) follow Jesus (remember WWJD?), rebel against unfair aspects of society and world affairs, and not be rebelling against God.

Just look at the prophets of old, speaking out (at great personal risk), against injustice in their lives and times. Just look at Jesus in the Temple that day – he was considered to be rebelling, acting and speaking out against the unfair / unjust practices associated with his religion of his time – practices that prevented so many people from drawing close to God in worship and observing their religious duty. But Jesus was not rebelling against God. He wasn't saying that the whole religious system was wrong and had to be thrown-out. He was saying that there were flaws and problems in how people were providing services associated with it.

So, sometimes as believers, we are called to 'rebel'. I don't mean rebel against God. I mean rebel against injustice – against that which is wrong, un-Godly. Sometimes God calls us to rebel against the way that everyone else (it sometimes seems!) has got used to doing (or not doing!) things. Sometimes we – as Christian people – are called to rebel against what others (sometimes the majority) believe to be right. So, let's not do something just because it seems everyone else is doing it. Let's not be passive and "When in Rome, do as the Roman's do!"

If we believe that there is a better way, a more just and fair way – a more Christ like way, then we should do it.

I wonder what Jesus would say or react if He walked into one of the churches in our own land? He wouldn't see the kind of buying or selling that went on in His day. But what would He say about the amount of money being spent on heating and maintaining old, inefficient, costly to maintain buildings for example?

The disciples came to realise that they didn't need a temple to worship God. They came to know that through the death of Jesus, they, and we, are no longer bound by specific buildings.

They were free to worship God wherever and whenever they liked!

As Ecclesiastes says, "there is a time to build up and a time to tear down." Only God knows. So, we should be listening to Him. By putting our faith in Jesus, we always have access to God.

There will be times when what we feel GOD is leading us to do, is different from what OTHERS around us are advocating and doing. If God's behind it, that's ok! Yes, it can be scary when we discern God calling us to 'rebel', to 'go against the flow'. But it's what God is calling us to do and at those times, we need to do and to be what GOD wants us to do and be.

It might look like rebellion to others – especially those who want to keep things as they are! And maybe it IS rebellion! But it's GOOD rebellion. It's obedience to God's will. It's Christ like. It's like John the Baptist; it's like Elijah and the other prophets of God. It's like all the disciples who would not 'toe' the party line. It's being a 'rebel with a cause' – God's holy cause!

J.B. Phillips, who made his own translation of the Bible, also wrote (among others) a book called 'Your God is too Small.'

In it he comments on a line of a verse of the Christmas carol 'Once in Royal David's City' – the line that says, "Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he." This is what he writes about that line: "This word 'mild' is apparently deliberately

used to describe [Jesus,] a man who did not hesitate to challenge and expose the hypocrisies of the religious people of his day ... a man [who] was regarded by the authorities as a public danger; a man who could be moved to violent anger by shameless exploitation or by smug [complacency] ... a man of such courage that he deliberately walked to what he knew would mean death, despite the earnest pleas of well-meaning friends.” Remember the “get Thee behind me Satan” last week?

‘Mild’! What a word to use” J.B. Phillips exclaims! “Jesus Christ might be called ‘meek’” he says, “In the sense of being utterly devoted to what he considered right, whatever the personal cost; but mild – never!”

So, we don’t always have to be ‘mild.’ We don’t always have to ‘fit-in.’ we don’t always have to ‘do what our neighbours do’, as Emily Post suggested. As long as it is God who is leading us, we do whatever we have to do, to follow God’s will. We can be rebellious, as long as the end result is to be more Christ like, to co-create with God the Kingdom of justice, peace and joy in all its fullness, here on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.