

April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday, Year A
Matthew 21:1-11
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 27:1-66

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Long, long ago, a guru – that is a wise, revered spiritual teacher – had a cat. The cat lived at an ashram, the guru’s hermitage or monastery, where he and his disciples prayed. The guru’s cat had a particularly rambunctious character. Each evening when the guru and his disciples sat to worship, this cat would act up, upsetting the silence, disturbing everyone’s worship. To prevent distraction, the guru ordered the cat to be tied up during the evening worship.

Some years passed, and the guru died, but the cat continued to be tied up during evening worship. Some more years passed, and the cat died. The guru’s disciples brought another cat to the ashram so that it could be tied up during the evening worship. Centuries later the guru’s scholarly disciples were writing learned treatises on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.¹

Do you know what it’s like to become distracted from the big picture? The purpose of the guru and his ashram was to draw close to God, to enter a silence and stillness where we encounter God and know God, where God fills us. The focus was lost. Instead of prayer, instead of being with God, the ashram became about tying up cats. The ashram became distracted, and probably insipid. But you can be sure that any attempt at reform, any effort to restore the focus to closeness with God, would be met with much resistance. The struggle between being close to God and tying up cats lurks in every religion and in every religious community. The presence of that struggle is strong in Holy Week.

Today we’ve entered Jerusalem with Jesus. Jerusalem is the heart of Israel, and the Temple the heart of its identity. Jews had built the Temple to glorify God and to show his holiness, that he was present with them. (Ex 25:8) Over the years, however, the popular meaning of the Temple evolved and became more complex. It was a great source of pride, and it indicated to many that Israel was separate, special, better than other people.

Among religious people, it’s a common phenomenon. For Episcopalians, one of its manifestations is what’s known as the “edifice complex.” We take

pride, among other things, in having the prettiest, most tasteful and posh buildings, many of the finest architects. It proves we're the best.

Imagine the Temple, a great structure, a magnificent and majestic building, designed to impress, sitting on top of a high point, dominating the landscape. The Temple sat in the center of a vast courtyard, very roughly 500 yards by 300 yards, with a grand, elegant portico enclosing this space. This vast courtyard was the Court of the Gentiles. It essentially served as a bazaar, a boisterous, energetic place with vendors selling sacrificial animals, currency exchangers trading coinage to make the Temple sacrifices possible, and other merchants catering to the needs of pilgrims. Everyone was permitted to be there.

Only Jews could enter the inner courts of the Temple, the sanctuary. They entered another courtyard, the Court of Women. Only men could proceed to the Court of the Israelites where they could look into the next court, the Court of the Priests, and watch the animal sacrifices being made there. Only priests could enter the Court of the Priests. The main inner room of the Temple had an entrance and then at the far end was a curtain veiling the Holy of Holies, and once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and burn incense.

The architecture signaled exclusion, pushing people away, not embracing. As soon as Jesus died on the cross, Matthew says that the veil that separates the Holy of Holies rips apart. His point: God is now available for all. For Jesus, this was the way it was always supposed to be. To Isaiah, God had said, "My house shall be called a house a prayer for all peoples." (Isa. 56:7) God said that Israel should be "a light to the nations" so that his salvation may stretch to the ends of the earth. (Isa. 49:6)

But instead of expanding the sense of God's presence, the Temple was being used to limit it, to narrow it, to stunt it. According to Jesus, the Temple was no longer about God's holiness, but about Israel's specialness, how they were unique, better. It was about tying up cats, not drawing close to God.

So on Monday, the day after he entered Jerusalem, Jesus went into the Temple and cleansed it. He drove out animal sellers and money changers, yelling at them that they'd made it a den of robbers. It wasn't that selling and exchanging money in the Temple was wrong or that the people there were corrupt or that there should be no commerce there. It was that Israel's religious establishment wasn't sharing what they had with others. In a sense, they were robbing, stealing what God intended for all and keeping it for themselves.²

Jesus was furious, but he's not anti-Judaism or anti-Semitic. He's saying, "My beloved people, we've lost our way." They were tying up cats, and the same thing happens in the Church and in every religion, where religion becomes a way of saying, "I'm better than you. I don't need to care for you. I have nothing to do with you." That is corrupt. Jesus warned us that religion can lead us away from God. Religion can be dangerous to our spiritual health.

The religious authorities were furious at Jesus. They knew that he was attacking them, not the merchants. More than anything, Jesus' attack on the Temple led to his crucifixion. Jesus threatened them, their way of life, and they were fearful of change and closed off to the Spirit and focused on the small things, nitpicking, tying up cats.

Jesus had the temerity to return to the Temple again on Tuesday, and he continued his attack on the Temple and the religious authorities. He mocked them worrying about the size of their phylacteries and length of the fringes on their prayer shawls. (Mt 23:5) He chided them for being exacting about the minor parts of law, but neglecting the weightier things - justice, mercy, trust of God. He said, "They strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel." (Mt 23:23-4)

The religious authorities couldn't let this go. They reacted with slander. They called him a false prophet. They criticized him for not being meticulous about the law. They tried to debate with him about the law's finer points. They were concerned about tying up cats, and Jesus responded by talking about love and compassion and commitment as the way to draw close to God.

And it wasn't just the religious establishment he annoyed. On Sunday, he entered Jerusalem with shouts of praise, the aura of triumph, but by the end of the week the entire crowd was calling for him to be crucified. Jesus had not defeated their enemies and filled their bellies and made them feel special. I imagine even the poor and outcast may have wanted him dead. I expect Nicholas Kazantzakis in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ* was right when he described the scene:

The blind, the leprous and the maimed now began to howl [at Jesus]. "Liar! Cheat! Deceiver of the people!"

"Where is the kingdom of heaven, where are the ovens with the loaves?" howled the ragamuffins, and they barraged him with lemon peels and stones.³

Jesus didn't deliver what they wanted. Jesus disappointed everyone. Jesus is not what we expect from God. No doubt the crowd felt forsaken by Jesus, by God. That feeling is part of the human experience - for everyone, the sadness we feel when things don't go the way we want.

I love Palm Sunday, but it is a tough day. On Palm Sunday, we are the crowd. It starts in cheers and triumph and moves to sadness, darkness, death... God on the cross, and we've put him there because our interest in power, prestige, position, comfort, wealth – in being special, in tying up cats, is often stronger than our desire for God as he is.

But despite this painful look at ourselves, there's good news. Even on the cross, having experienced the worst of betrayal, cruelty, pain, abandonment, feeling utterly alone, Jesus still cried out: "MY God, MY God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Are those our words? Are they how the crowd felt? How we sometimes feel? Possibly.

Regardless, saying "My God," Jesus was affirming relationship – My God, relationship that holds together no matter what. Jesus refuses to allow our sin, our anger, our disappointment with him to kill our relationship with him. The final judgment for our sin is not our condemnation; it's not our separation from God. Rather, the final judgment is God raising Jesus and inviting us to enter his life and love as his sons and daughters. The final judgment is ours: tying up cats or embracing Jesus, his arms opened wide for us.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Anthony de Mello, "Guru's Cat," *The Song of the Bird*, Image Books (1984), p. 63.

² Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, SPCK (2002), pp. 41–47, source for Temple discussion.

³ Nicholas Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Simon & Schuster, Scribner Paperback (1960, 1998), p. 442