

Title: Jesus Hissed

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, may we be continually transformed as temples of your Spirit as St. Paul tells us, being worthy of you and strengthened through prayer, especially prayer through your son, through whom we offer all our prayers in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

On the train to Brindavan a Swami sits beside a common man who asks him if indeed he has attained self-mastery, as the name "Swami" implies. "I have," says the Swami. "And have you mastered anger?" "I have." "You mean you can control your anger?" "I can." "And you do not feel anger?" "I do not." "Is this the truth, Swami?" "It is."

After a silence the man asks again, "Do you really feel that you have controlled your anger?" "I have, as I told you," the Swami answers. "Then do you mean to say, you never feel anger, even—" "You are going on and on—what do you want?" the Swami shouts. "Are you a fool? When I have told you—" "O, Swami, this is anger. You have not mas—" "Ah, but I have," the Swami interrupts. "Have you not heard about the abused snake? Let me tell you the story."

"On a path that went by a village in Bengal there lived a cobra who used to bite people on their way to worship at the temple there. As the incidents increased, everyone became fearful, and many refused to go to the temple. The Swami who was the master at the temple was aware of the problem and took it upon himself to put an end to it. Taking himself to where the snake dwelt, he used a mantra to call the snake to him and bring it into submission."

"The Swami then said to the snake that it was wrong to bite the people who walked along the path to worship and made him promise sincerely that he would never do it again. Soon it happened that the snake was seen by a passer-by upon the path, and it made no move to bite. Then it became known that the snake had somehow been made passive, and people grew unafraid. It was not long before the village boys were dragging the poor snake along behind them as they ran laughing here and there. When the temple Swami passed that way again he called the snake to see if he had kept his promise—"

“The snake humbly and miserably approached the Swami, who exclaimed, ‘You are bleeding! Tell me how this has come to be.’ The snake was near tears and blurted out that he had been abused ever since he made his promise to the Swami. ‘I hold you not to bite,’ said the Swami, ‘but I did not tell you not to hiss!’”

We might summarize today’s gospel as Jesus hissed. This could mean that Jesus’ hiss was worse than his bite. Or Jesus had a hissy fit.

If we read today’s gospel reading in context, we might be confused. John’s cleansing of the temple happens right after the Wedding of Cana and is very early in Jesus’ ministry. In the other gospels, the cleansing of the temple occurs after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in other words, Palm Sunday.

John is saying something very important in the first sentence of this passage. The Passover is near. Observant Jews often, though not required, went to Jerusalem to observe the Passover. Jesus is one of those observant Jews. Though an opponent of the institutional religion, Jesus observes the rituals of that same religion. Jesus is a good Jew. One may argue that Jesus sought to reform Judaism rather than replace it. But oftentimes, people in a position of power take offense to being replaced. Just ask Martin Luther.

We are next told that Jesus sees a bunch of animals for sale and some people were changing money. I guess that created an easy answer to the question, “Hey buddy, to you have change for this?” An explanation for the scene is needed. When it says “in the temple,” it refers to the temple grounds. No one is in the building. Only priests were allowed in the building. The religious rites were all held out of doors.

The marketplace that John describes would have been in the Court of Gentiles. This is an outer court where non-Jews were allowed. Gentiles were not allowed closer to the temple proper. Walls would prevent people from even seeing the temple from this court. It could be seen from the Mount of Olives. This location of the market place would also allow the temple officials to hire gentiles to run the businesses there. This will be very important in a moment.

Why all the animals? If you were an urban Jew or say a farmer, you would not normally have livestock. Yet the Law of Moses requires certain animals for certain sacrifices as part of the Jewish religious rites. How can you perform the required rites without the proper animals? Simple. Go to the temple, buy the animals, and present them to a priest for sacrifice. The animals listed in this passage are the specific animals required for the various sacrifices.

Another function that Jews must do is paying their temple tax. The place doesn't run for free. This would be an assessment on top of what you would pay to your local synagogue. We don't have any problem putting U.S. currency into our plates, which have someone's picture on them – or do we? To the Jewish officials, accepting money with someone's likeness on it is accepting a graven image and is therefore illegal, according to the Law of Moses. In fact such currency could not be touched.

As a province of the Roman Empire, these Jews would use Roman currency to do business. On the coins is a likeness of the emperor. The problem is that the emperor is worshipped as a god. This currency cannot be allowed in the temple. The money must be changed from Roman currency to temple currency so people can pay their temple tax. Taxing people is much more efficient than asking for pledges. But, unfortunately, the first amendment gets in the way. (Sigh) This is why money changers are necessary at the temple and why it is better that they are gentiles.

Jesus' complaint was that the temple grounds had become a marketplace. It had a banks and pet stores. I am assuming that the purpose of the Court of the Gentiles was for gentiles to become accustomed to Jewish worship and have a particular place for prayers. With all the commotion from the banks and pet stores, that would be impossible.

Now for another assumption: the priests could have also done what Jesus did. Perhaps they encouraged having the banks and pet stores on the temple grounds where the priests have control over them and the priests may have participated in the profits from the activity. If the banks and pet stores were off of the temple grounds, then the priests would have no control over their activities – just saying.

When God gave the Israelites the law, the Torah, it was part of covenant. God will be their God and take care of them and they are to adhere to a moral code and observe very specific religious practices and rites. But when bad things happened, they asked, “What did we do wrong? How did we sin?” So faith became a commercial transaction. Then the moral codes can be put aside as long as you do all the right rituals.

When we read in John’s gospel, “the Jews,” it means the Jewish authorities. Jesus is a Jew. Here “the Jews” are talking to Jews. So there is a distinction between Jews and “*the Jews*.” The authorities ask for a sign. An odd question. They want Jesus to justify his actions.

Jesus says that after this temple is destroyed, he will raise it up in three days. This will later be used against Jesus at his trial. Jesus is referring to his body, but they think he is talking about the temple. I mean, after all he did say “temple.” I don’t think that there is anyone here who wouldn’t think that Jesus was talking about the temple. Jesus’s disciples thought he was talking about the temple. It is only after the resurrection and after reflection that they realized that Jesus was talking about his body.

Jesus’ death and resurrection ushers in a new understanding of our relationship with God that goes way beyond the temple and Jewish rites. Jesus’ new commandment of love replaces the Torah, the Law of Moses. “Jesus introduces a new concept of worship, which will be later developed by Paul in 1 Corinthians: ‘All of you are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it’ (12:27), and hence, ‘You are God’s temple, and God’s Spirit lives in you ... Gods’ temple is holy, and you yourselves are his temple’ (3:16-17).”¹

Though the bankers and pet store owners are providing a service so that religious activities can take place at the temple, Jesus, through righteous anger, is saying that it is inappropriate for this activity to take place on the temple grounds. The temple grounds are places of prayer. So what commercial kinds of activities are appropriate at our churches? Would Jesus come and overturn our tables? Should our churches be places used exclusively for prayer? Or should our churches continue a tradition as a

¹ Rev. Fr. Mariano Perrón, Director of Inter-Religious Affairs at the Archdiocese of Madrid, Spain.

community center? Do you in the way you live your life reflect Jesus' redemptive sacrifice?

Text: **John 2:13–22** (NRSV)

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. ²

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 2:13–22). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.