

1 Luther Commemoration (18 February) 2010

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Preached at Nashota House, Episcopal Theological Seminary
Isaiah 55.6-11; Psalm 16
Galatians 2.16-21; St. John 2.13-17

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for thy house will consume me’.”

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Commemorating Luther in light of Christ cleansing the temple may raise a question or two. But, then, commemorating Luther *at all* may raise questions. For some it may be enough that in the latter part of the last century Pope John Paul II declared Luther a faithful son of the Catholic Church; yet for others he remains, as for Cardinal Newman, founder of the Lutheran heresy. According to Luther’s own words—and I think especially of those recorded by Peter Ackroyd in his biography of Thomas Moore—Cardinal Newman may have been too kind. Not that a charge of heresy wouldn’t have caused Luther grief; but attaching his name to any movement or church probably would have caused him more. Few things are clearer in Luther than his opposition to attaching his name to any movement now bearing it. In such a revered setting as this, one can hardly bring oneself to quote Luther’s own foul, ribald, and rude estimations of himself. The thought of commemorating him (though perhaps his death might pose a different question) would I think have been to him about as inviting as commemorating (in delicate Pauline terms) refuse, dung, σκίβαλον.

We would, I think, distinguish between Luther and that movement attributed to him. He would, I imagine, distinguish between events attributed to him, and ecclesial currents generated and shaped by the movement of the Holy Spirit within the general framework of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In other words, what some may view as Luther overturning and tearing down the church, we could view as the Holy Spirit cleansing the church in a manner not unlike events reported in John 2.

History tells a shopworn tale, and we who are doomed to repeat it may well wonder why: why make comparisons between Christ’s temple cleansing and Luther’s reformation? Is that what we are called to do? Is Luther following in the steps of the whip-wielding Christ who drives beasts from a holy place? Or is Luther, as Pope Leo wrote, himself a wild beast rampaging within and tearing down the walls of holy mother church? Is Luther a cleansing agent of the Spirit? Or is Luther a corrupting filth infecting the body of Christ? Of course, a Lutheran answer would be “both.” Luther is both a cleansing agent and—*simul iustus et peccator*—a corrupting filth.

Even so, I suspect Luther would also distinguish between his own cleansing/corrupting work as part of the church’s continual reformation, and the saving

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work of Christ. It is one thing to commemorate Luther, but it is another to proclaim the Christ to whom Luther points. It is one thing to commemorate Luther's conflicted ministry on behalf of the church, and quite another to proclaim those conflicted events which lead inevitably to Jesus Christ's suffering and death on behalf of the whole world. John's Gospel proclaims those events—with Passover on the horizon, that festival at which the rabbis expected the Messiah to appear.

With Passover in the air, Jesus enters the Temple with a zeal guaranteed to consume him. He makes a whip out of ropes and uses it to drive out those who sell beasts and birds for use in temple sacrifices commanded in the Law. It's not as though they were selling popcorn and projecting re-runs of *As the World Turns* or *Lost* on the Temple walls. They weren't engaged in a purely entrepreneurial enterprise. They were promoting mission trips to Cabo San Lucas, offering pilgrimages to Canterbury, and selling tickets to see the Archbishop at Trinity Church, Wall Street.

These are not bad things. But Jesus doesn't drive them out because they are bad. He drives them out that he might be taken in—devoured, consumed by death. He drives them out so that zeal for “thy house” would consume him. It's not necessarily or only his zeal, but theirs as well that will kill him. As in most church conflicts zeal is two-sided: theirs and ours. And, of course, ours is the right one.... But that doesn't really matter. It's not a question of morality—not, strictly speaking, a question of right and wrong. It's a question of consumption: zeal—both his and ours—consumes Christ. Zeal consumes him. That is, it leads directly to his death and resurrection, as the passage immediately following indicates: “After he had been raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this....”

We are here not in order to cleanse this temple—any more than Luther's true purpose was cleansing the medieval church. It was not. As is patently obvious to anyone even remotely aware of things Lutheran, Episcopalian, protestant, catholic, or human: cleansing is an ever-present, all-consuming, and secondary calling. Our primary calling—as in the case of Luther himself—is the consumption of Christ. We are here to consume him—in his zeal and ours. Here in this bread and cup he is zealously for us—driving us out that he might bring us in. Chewing us out that we might chew him up and live. As he drove out the beasts and their masters so also he drives us into the Kingdom of God—not by means of a whip, but by means of his own body and blood, his own life, death, and resurrection. His zeal consumes us that we might consume him. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.