

Matthew 21:17-23 New International Version (NIV)

17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.

21 Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

--

Nowadays we can get over concerned with the minutiae of history - exactly what happened and when, the precise details. For most of human history, its not been when something happened, but what happened and the effect it had that matters more. For example - It wasn't what date the Nile flooded, but the fact that most years it flooded 1/3rd of the country.

so when we get to the last week of Jesus life before the resurrection, the details of what happened on which day are a bit sketchy - Lukes tell of Jesus riding in on donkey and going straight to the temple to clean it out - Matthew and Mark say it happened the next day. John's gospel has it 3 years before, just after the wedding at Cana - but that's John for you!

The point is not particularly "did this happen on a Sunday?" (the Jewish first day of the week) or a Monday - but the meaning behind the action - what is Jesus trying to say by clearing the temple?

You may well ask - why were people selling and buying in the temple and changing money in the first place? And I'd be glad if you did, because I've got the answer right here..

So in the book of the law - the torah - the first 5 books of the bible, and particularly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there is a system of sacrifices set up.

The logic goes that God is holy and good, and that we humans are not.

We do things that anger God, or make us unable to be near him

To stop him destroying us, to allow us to approach him - we need to pay a price - preferably something valuable.

So, if you go back 4000 years, to the time of Abraham and Isaac, the cultures we know of, and the archaeological evidence we have, is that at that time there was human sacrifice - you can't get more valuable than that.

The Jewish history will tell it that their God abhorred human sacrifice and so set up animal offering instead - and there was a going rate - so Leviticus 4 says - if someone sins, then the priest must offer a bull, and sacrifice it on the altar in a prescribed way, and if you can't afford a bull, then a lamb will do. - As long as it is without defect.

Some sacrifices are to say sorry or make amends, and some are to say thank you.

For example Leviticus 14 - if someone has a skin disease, and then recovers - they must give a thank offering and sacrifice 2 male lambs and a ewe - a year old without defect. And Leviticus goes on to say "if you can't afford that, then a dove will do"

Now although these sacrifices are all written down - and even developed further in other Jewish writings like the Talmud and the Mid-rash - we're not sure how far they were carried out. IF you imagine 30,000 people in Jerusalem all offering cattle - that would be a lot of meat, a lot of burning - and frankly unsustainable!

What seemed to have happened by Jesus day is that it had all become much more ritualised, and symbolic. So most often offered were doves and small goats, or even models of those - that you would buy, and then hand over to the temple priests who would take care of the rest. The equivalent of lighting a candle in church maybe. But.. because the currency and coinage in the

country was Roman, and had Caesars face on it - and Caesar had declared himself to be a God - so to use it would be blasphemy - so the temple had minted its own currency, its own coinage.

And so - you need money changers to buy the doves and pigeons and goats, and they of course charged interest, and the rates changed, so there was a whole stock-market trading floor going on of buying and selling money, and buying and selling animals - lots of people getting rich of the spiritual tourists, off the passover pilgrims to Jerusalem

And in comes Jesus - and makes a whip, and turns over their table, and drives the dealers out! Honestly the equivalent of going into a shopping centre like west quay with a machine gun. And we would say - terrorist! And the authorities would agree.

But Jesus is making a point. He has come to do away with the whole sacrificial system. He is cleaning it all out - its all gone wrong - its not helping us and its not the right image of God. As even Isaiah had said - God is not interested in our sacrifices and burnt offerings - he wants our hearts to be right. Jesus is telling us that while we have the wrong image of God, then our hearts cannot be right. As long as we think there is an angry God who needs to be pacified or bought off in some way then our response to him will not be one of love, but of fear. And who wants a relationship built on fear? Certainly not God. Jesus wants to fix our image of God - to correct our vision - to show us that God loves us. Then we are free to respond, to choose to love him back.

And Jesus is ushering in a new start - cleaning the temple so something new can come. And in Matthew's gospel we have the extra verse that once he had cleared it, Jesus healed the blind and the lame. This is what our God is like - caring, compassionate, not trying to catch us out or make us pay.

And Jesus will spend the rest of the week teaching in the newly cleansed temple. Teaching about what God is really like and what is about to happen, and about the Messiah.

It doesn't say whether the traders returned the next day - I rather suspect they decided not to cause trouble, because anyone could see, the way Jesus was acting, he was a marked man and it was only a matter of time before the authorities would have to take some action. Perhaps this new start would't get off the ground anyway.