

How did Jesus scandalise people by driving the merchants from the Temple?

Extract from the book CHOMÉ Étienne, *La non-violence évangélique et le défi de la sortie de la violence. Théologie pratique et gestion de conflits*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL, 2016, p. 198-200.

In reading this Gospel event, François Vaillant, a Dominican accustomed to organising non-violent interventions, found all the characteristics of a non-cooperation campaign, a direct action of civil disobedience. Jesus dares to attack a perfectly legal religious system that everyone accepts. At the risk of making himself illegal, he refused to be an accomplice. He overcame the fear of getting into trouble. He ceased to cooperate. On that day, he had the courage to confront a number of merchants who were not choirboys. He does not resign himself to the situation. He takes risks. He exposes himself and could well fear for his safety. His strong determination is impressive, as is his great inner freedom.

Mark specifies that Jesus had come to the Temple the day before, that he had "*looked around at everything*" (Mk 11:11). This incision in the text speaks to non-violent activists who, before taking public action, check out the surroundings beforehand. For them, Jesus was not improvising. He has discerned what is at stake in this intervention, he has thought about the conflict initiative he was going to take. In Saint Luke we read that for three years, the prophet from Galilee had been announcing the good news of his Father's mercy and grace. Salvation is offered freely. But the Nazarene did not content himself with preaching, he took action. In the Temple, convincing took the form of coercion, putting concrete obstacles in the way of the system; chasing away the animals of the vendors and overturning the tables of the moneychangers, depriving them of the means they needed for their trade. Jesus goes from table to table and asks the dove merchants to remove their birds. His movements create a general uproar and chaos. This public scene is going to get the "whole of Jerusalem" talking. The scandal caused by this act of sabotage drew the attention of public opinion to the underlying scandal: the corruption of the Temple. Jesus touched people's consciences, opened their eyes and shook them out of their passivity.

Jesus created a conflict and organised a public confrontation. He incurred the wrath of the authorities but there is no mention of him being reprimanded by the crowd for any violence. To be sure, an entirely different conflict dynamic would have taken place if he had used the whip as a weapon turned directly against the merchants themselves. They would then have immediately reacted in self-defence against Jesus. Their response would very probably led to an escalation, an excess of violence. The disciples present would have come to Jesus' rescue. At the very least, the Temple police would have urgently intervened to neutralise the dangerous assailant. Just above the Temple, the Roman troops of Antonia were also ready to intervene. In these festive times, it was responsible for preventing any riots. "When it came to violence, Jesus would certainly not have had the last word. [...] Was it by the sheer force of his authority that Jesus was able to persuade the merchants and sellers to leave? In fact, there is no evidence that Jesus acted alone. He was accompanied by his disciples and it is likely that they took part in the action. When all has been said, there is a real enigma here. Perhaps it was nothing more than a symbolic action which the Evangelists would have then given a slightly embellished account."

In Jesus' eyes, there is something even worse than the corruption of the Temple by a mercantile traffic exploiting a gullible people: it is those who are turned away from a true

relationship with their Father. A true relationship requires a conversion of heart and mind. "Christ continues the prophets' struggle against idols. In the scene with the Temple merchants, for example, by upsetting the money-changers' tables, he sets upright what the idolatry of money had turned over. The house of prayer (relationship with God) had become a place of commerce (where money is Master). Jesus' gesture is not violent: it denounces radical violence". And Jesus' fight against the existing sacrificial cult provoked violent reactions from the authorities, who will suppress it. Mark and Luke say that "when the chief priests and scribes heard of it, they looked for ways to destroy him". Matthew, the Jewish scribe, speaks of their indignation. Jesus met the same fate as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and so many others who attacked the established order.

It is time to end centuries of misinterpretation of good violence. Calvin exploited this page of the Gospel to legitimise exceptional violence in the management of the affairs of the city. Christ's gentleness would have had its exceptions; he would have been capable of violence in certain cases in order to fulfil his duty as master. Even today," acknowledges Mgr Dubost, "some people try to legitimise the use of violence by referring to the famous passage in the Gospel in which Jesus armed himself with a whip to chase away the merchants from the temple (Mt 10:34)7 ". "The image of a violent Jesus driving the merchants out of the Temple in Jerusalem is ingrained in the collective unconscious. For centuries it has served to legitimise "good violence", as if there could be such a thing as good violence! [...] Christian or not, we all have in mind the image of Jesus driving the merchants from the Temple. And more often than not, we associate this action with an outburst of violence that would certainly demonstrate that the Nazarene was not always non-violent. He took a whip, and we understand, hit the merchants. If our imagination conveys violence in the "emptying" of the Temple, we may have to blame ancient religious paintings that have engraved in the collective unconscious a scene that does not conform to the Gospel texts". Thinkers of active non-violence are keen to use words other than "violence" to describe Jesus' resolute struggle. For them, there is a confusion of language in speaking as the following theologians do: "Jesus drives the merchants out of the Temple: He is the hunter! From the outset, we are in a mood that is unexpected for those who have a sweet and gentle image of God made man. He is the violent one, because if there is a violence of hatred, there is also a violence of love". "Jesus, a prophet of violence, when he chases animals out of the temple, a victim of violence when he is led to agony, without saying a word, like the sheep of Isaiah."

In 1967, wondering if there was a Christian doctrine on violence, Claude Wiéner hesitated: "Perhaps Jesus only used the whip against animals, according to an exegesis recently proposed with some plausibility; the gesture is no less violent for that." Jesus is combative but his gesture deploys a force of a different order than violence. It took time between the 1950s and today to integrate the new key to reading, based on the life-testimony of men like Gandhi and Martin Luther King and a non-violent doctrine in gestation that allowed a new interpretation of the Gospel.

Jesus' healthy and holy anger must be properly understood.

This reading does not fit in with the spiritualising explanations of the "holy anger of the Son of God». In fact, the Gospels say nothing about Jesus' anger. It says: "His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (Jn 2:17). If there is any aggression in this scene, it is all directed against the denunciation of the sacrificial system. It is not that of the angry man who no longer knows what he is saying or doing, who attacks others with violent words, in the grip of hatred. By emptying the Temple, Jesus knew what he was doing and why he was doing it: he was indignant and acted strategically. If Jesus had

acted out of impulsive anger, we would not have had the same scene. "Jesus was not afraid to be aggressive when he acted in the temple in Jerusalem. This aggressiveness in him is a strength of combativeness, not intended for violence but for justice", emphasises François Vaillant, recalling Gandhi: "Non-violence presupposes above all that we are capable of fighting".

From a moral point of view, when the object of anger is evil, it is virtue. It is indifference to evil that is the vice! In the case of injustice, the problem of anger is secondary. It is not the anger that must be rebuked, but the injustice that is the cause of it. Luther said: "When I am angry, I can write well, pray well and preach well. My mind is sharpened, free from the temptations of the world." Sin, in the case of injustice, is more likely to befall those who allow themselves the right to turn a blind eye than those who respond "present" to the duty to intervene. It is in this sense that we can speak of holy anger.