

If there is anything that we learn clearly from the scriptures we have just heard, it is that God is different from us. While it is true that we are created in the image of God, nevertheless, God does things we humans find surprising. We are often puzzled. We find ourselves scratching our heads and wondering, “Why did God do it that way? What’s going on here?”

This morning’s Gospel is a particularly good example of that. Why was Jesus so angry that he had what can best be described as a public temper tantrum? He had managed to deal calmly with numerous public attacks and tricky questions set for him by folks who were out to embarrass and discredit him. What was it that finally cost him that calm control on this occasion?

The clue to one possible explanation is contained in our first reading. Remember what I said before: God is not like anything else in human experience. This is abundantly clear from the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Moses and his thousands of followers have fled from the land of Egypt with its whole collection of gods. In contrast they are to have but one. And what a one this is. Not only must they have no other gods, but they may make no physical representation of this God to use in worship. “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”

Consider that at this point in their history, they have never had a temple for this God. Even in the time of Abraham, their ancestor who worshiped God with great faithfulness, there was never more than an open-air altar constructed of gathered stones. Now, we’re meeting a people for whom such simplicity was foreign. These folks were accustomed to the temples and idols of Egypt. The worship culture that surrounded them assumed that the magnificence of the temple, the gold of the idol, the jewels that adorned it, all of these things demonstrated the power of the deity.

Now, obviously, God has great power. After all, it is God who has gathered them together under Moses’ leadership. It is God who has persuaded Pharaoh through the infliction of the plagues to let them go. It is God who has delivered them from the Angel of Death in the night of the Passover. And it is God who has parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing them to cross on dry land, then causing the waters to close up,

drowning Pharaoh's mighty army. Surely any deity this powerful would want rich symbols displayed and worshiped! Yet here is God who not only says "no" to this human compulsion, but forbids it outright.

The next two Commandments are also confusing. "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name." It is not clear exactly what constitutes "misuse" of God's name, but one might assume that use of God's name for personal advantage or gain would qualify, as would invoking that name to curse or condemn.

Then we come to a Commandment that is directly counter-cultural: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." And it goes on: "For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

If we ever needed evidence that God's rules are different from those of the world, here it is. To refuse to work every seventh day looks foolish in the eyes of the world. It means we forego any income to be gained from that day's efforts. God is commanding us to rest, just as, so the Commandment reminds us, God rested on the seventh day and contemplated the results of six days of creation.

In the world of that time, this looked crazy. Every culture that surrounded the Israelites worked every day. It took an everyday effort to produce enough to survive and thrive in those lands. In Egypt, as in any agricultural economy, farmers knew you worked as the weather directed. What if the seventh day is just the bright sunny one you have been waiting for to plant, cultivate, or harvest? God commands that we rest regardless of the circumstances, trusting that God will provide enough for us.

So here we are. God has commanded that his chosen people have only one God, not the dozens of the cultures around them. There can be no magnificent gold, bejeweled idols. They must use the name of God carefully. And every seventh day is to be given over to a holy day of rest. It is no wonder that these people were viewed with skepticism by their neighbors. It would appear that God intends to create of them a peculiar people indeed. However, if they are to be a witness to the world of God's presence and nature, one might expect that they would appear peculiar to those around them.

If they are to lead the world to the knowledge and love of God they must look and live differently from the culture of the ordinary and everyday. They must reflect the nature of God rather than the nature of the world.

This brings us back to Jerusalem as Passover draws near, and to Jesus standing in the temple. Jerusalem, let us recall, is the holy city of that time and the temple its most holy place. One would expect it to embody all that invokes the most holy of feelings. In a people set apart, commanded to behave in “peculiar” ways, one would expect no less.

Yet what Jesus finds is no different from the street outside the temple gates.

He is outraged to find dishonest commerce going on. Recall – animals offered for ritual sacrifice had to meet rigid requirements. Those purchased from approved temple vendors were guaranteed to be acceptable. Might it be these vendors were cutting corners? Another issue: Purchases could only be made with temple currency. Might those whose were conducting these currency exchanges be corrupted, creating a scandal, not to mention an additional burden for the poor?

These abuses would have given Jesus adequate cause for his rage but I’m not sure even these things were, at heart, what it was all about. Quite simply, this holy place looked just like the marketplace. What should have been a model of another way of living, another way of relating to one another, an example of God’s way, had become no different from the way of the world.

As Christians, we are called to be a witness to our neighbors, not their clones. If our lives are no different from those of unbelievers, what is the point of believing? If the ways in which we conduct our affairs in the church are indistinguishable from the ways of commerce, how can we accomplish God’s work with faithfulness and integrity?

We would do well to remember the energy with which Jesus made a whip of cords and drove the animals out of the temple. Take comfort from the spectacle of him overturning the tables of the money changers. Know that this same strength, courage, and righteousness upholds us every day of our lives. As we confront the challenges of the Christian life in our times, God in Christ is present so that we too can exclaim with Paul, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”