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Jesus' illegal Holy Week activity

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Mairead Maguire advises those who have doubts about the nonviolence of Jesus to spend a quiet afternoon in their local church looking up at a large crucifix. Steady meditation on Christ's passion and death reveals his steadfast nonviolence and the spiritual explosion of love and peace that he unleashed, she believes.

In Houston this past Saturday for a retreat day on "Jesus' Holy Week Journey of Peace," we discussed why Jesus was killed. The story has become so warped for the benefit of the ruling elite that we forget that Jesus was executed by the empire as a terrorist. Indeed, he was a revolutionary, but a nonviolent revolutionary.

Luke lists three charges against Jesus: inciting the people to revolt, urging people not to pay taxes, and claiming to be a king. This nonviolent Jesus was decidedly not passive. He did not sit under a tree and practice his breathing. He walked regularly into the face of danger, spoke the truth, and demanded justice.

As far as decent law-abiding, religious people were concerned, he was nothing but trouble. He hung out with the wrong people, healed at the wrong time, visited the wrong places, and said the wrong things. His active nonviolence was dangerous and threatening.

It's clear from the basic plot line in Mark, Matthew, and Luke that Jesus organizes the poor and disenfranchised in Galilee and then heads toward Jerusalem on a walking campaign of nonviolence. He enters the city riding on a donkey in a peace march, cases the Temple, and the next day, engages in peaceful civil disobedience by turning over the tables of the money changers and preventing people from coming and going.

After denouncing this "den of robbers," Jesus teaches the good news of love, compassion and justice.

But note: in the Synoptic Gospels, there is no mention of a whip, no talk of violence, no notice of the animals. The whole event probably lasted a mere five minutes. But the crowds might have stayed for hours to listen to the Teacher. As anyone who has engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience knows, this was classic symbolic direct action. And it needed to be done.

The Jerusalem Temple, built by Herod Antipas at the beginning of the century, was held up as the one and only place where God dwelt. We have nothing quite like it today. It combined worship, commerce, local government, execution sight and imperial control.

As I understand it, it would resemble some massive Washington, D.C. building containing the Pentagon, the U.S. Capitol, the White House, Wall Street, the World Bank, Citibank, Goldman Sachs, Walmart, the National Cathedral and the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception -- all rolled into one, as God's home.

The faithful were told to pay God a visit each year. Every Passover, they made the long trek to Jerusalem and paid a hefty fee to enter God's sanctuary. The population tripled to over 180,000. Over 18,000 lambs would be purchased and slaughtered for holy sacrifice in the Temple. A heavy tax was charged for all of this commerce.

In effect, the Temple held a national bank, offered loans, kept track of debts and changed money for unclean sinners so they could pay with "holy" Temple money. Another fee would be added for the money-changing.

Women, poor people, and other outcasts had to purchase expensive doves so they would be "purified" and then able to offer worship. The various fees robbed the poor and did so in God's name under the greedy eye of the Roman Empire.

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Anyone who cared about justice or read the prophets would be outraged at such institutionalized injustice. It is only natural that Jesus took action to protest this big corporate, imperial, religious rip-off.

As various commentators have noted, Jesus did not merely want lower prices for the poor. He did not seek to reform the Temple. Through his symbolic action, he called for an end to the entire Temple system.

With this action, he announced that God was present within every person; present whenever two or three gathered to pray in his name; present in the hungry, sick or imprisoned; present in the breaking of the bread and the passing of the cup; present in Spirit and in Truth.

Of course this action and those teachings threatened and outraged the religious authorities. Their economic and political privilege would end if Christ's teachings were adopted, so they had him killed.

But in Houston and elsewhere, the question inevitably comes up: "Yes, but didn't Jesus chase people out of the Temple with a whip? Isn't that violent?"

Many remember El Greco's unhelpful painting, "Christ Cleansing the Temple," which depicts Jesus with a raised arm, grasping a twenty foot long whip, ready to strike a group of people, including terrified women.

I insist: El Greco was wrong. Jesus did not use violence. He never hurt anyone. He never struck anyone.

He never killed anyone.

But he did not tolerate injustice, greed, hypocrisy or untruth. He confronted systemic injustice head on -- as his disciples Gandhi and King would later do -- and gave his life for God's reign of justice and peace. But he always did so through meticulous nonviolence.

The only mention of the "rope" or the "whip" is in John's Gospel, written decades after the Synoptic Gospels. John changes the entire plotline. He *begins* his Gospel with Jesus' nonviolent direct action in the Temple (2:13-26). He has a completely different agenda. His Gospel describes various signs and wonders, offers a series of self-descriptive "I Am" sayings, and culminates with the dramatic raising of Lazarus from the dead. With that, he takes us to the Last Supper, where Jesus offers a lengthy reflection and teaching before his arrest.

Throughout John's Gospel, like the others, Jesus is perfectly nonviolent. Indeed, he speaks more about nonviolent love -- *agape* -- than in the other gospels. With the cleansing of the Temple, John paints Jesus as a prophetic Jeremiah figure. With the mention of the whip, he amps up the drama, then resets the focus on Jesus' impending resurrection.

We're told Jesus made a whip from cords and drove out the oxen, sheep and doves and everyone else. Long ago, at the Jesuit School of Theology, my scripture teacher explained that this was the only instance in the entire Bible of that particular obscure Greek word, translated as "rope" or "whip."

To get thousands of sheep, oxen and doves into this enormous structure, the cattlemen used ropes to lead them up the high stone walkways into the building. Jesus simply took those ropes, which the cattle, sheep and oxen would have recognized, to lead the animals outside. Then, he overturned the bankers' tables and launched into his speech.

But didn't he take a rope or a whip and start striking people? Some translations would have you believe so, but my scripture professor said no. That would be entirely inconsistent with the Jesus portrayed throughout John's Gospel, as well as the Synoptic Gospels.

Jesus was nonviolent from Cana to the cross and back to Galilee. With such spectacular nonviolence, one cannot even imagine Jesus striking the poor animals. Indeed, he was liberating them from their impending execution!

This one word has been used to justify countless massacres, crusades, wars and nuclear weapons. Perhaps we want Jesus to have some trace of violence in order to justify our own violence. We desperately hope he was violent so we can dismiss his teachings and wage war and build nuclear weapons guilt free.

Remember John's different agenda. He has a different punch line: "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days." Jesus is the new temple, and he will rise, John writes.

If the climactic action of Jesus' life, in John's version, is the raising of Lazarus, then Jesus' allusion to resurrection here at the start makes sense. In my forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, I suggest that Lazarus represents the entire human race, which Jesus calls out of the culture of war, empire and death into the new life of resurrection.

With this prophetic action, Jesus points to himself right from the start as "the Resurrection."

Perhaps the real Holy Week question is: "What does Jesus' dramatic illegal, nonviolent direct action against systemic injustice mean for us? If he gave his life to confront Temple injustice, what would he

want his followers to do in the face of the Pentagon, Los Alamos, the School of the Americas, or our other war facilities??

I think Jesus would expect his followers to take similar bold, nonviolent action for justice and peace.

In this light, the climax of Holy Week is utterly amazing -- and equally illegal. After the Roman Empire killed Jesus, they put their imperial seal on his tomb.

As Daniel Berrigan writes, in effect they were saying, "We killed you, you're dead, now stay dead! We order you to stay put!"

Jesus was not allowed to rise from the dead. But once again, Jesus breaks the law! He commits civil disobedience, rolls away the stone and starts organizing all over again!

If we accompany this nonviolent Jesus through his passion, death and resurrection, we may find ourselves in trouble for carrying on his disruptive campaign of nonviolent resistance to the big business of injustice, war and empire.

But that would be a great Easter blessing -- proof that he is alive and well in our midst. Alleluia!

To hear a new podcast interview with John, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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