

Having an argument is a good way of ‘creating an atmosphere’: one can enter a room and know immediately that something is going on – something bad – something not conducive to peace. But one can also enter a room after an argument and know that something good is going on: that a good argument has led to a good atmosphere, has cleared the air – made it clear again. In this light, we can see Jesus as God’s argument with humankind. It’s an argument that goes back a long way – all the way to Adam, in one account, and revisited many times in people such as Noah and Abraham and Moses and the prophets. We hear it today summed up in the Commandments:

You shall have no gods except me.

You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth, you shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

And Jesus enters his Father’s Temple only to find that it’s full of idol worship, with a much wider frame of reference than we might at first imagine for, in St John’s gospel, it’s not only the money changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice which Jesus is having an argument with but the whole Temple system, indeed, the whole manner of humanity’s relationship to God. For, once again, we’ve got it wrong, mistaking the things of God’s creation for God itself; constructing a system of sacrifice with which we can barter our way into heaven, placating an angry God with gifts. And this mistake on our part can be replicated here in our own Catholic worship, in our own delight in sacraments and sacramentals as objects of veneration in themselves, as a means of ordering our lives with God so that our eternal reward is in some way guaranteed. I’m having an argument here to ‘clear the air’ and a story from a Sufi mystic might help:

Rabia of Basra was seen running through the streets of her city one day carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When someone asked her what she was doing she said she wanted to burn down the rewards of paradise with the torch and put out the fires of hell with the water, because both blocked the way to God. ‘O Allah,’ Rabia prayed, ‘if I worship you for the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship you, in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship you for your own sake, grudge me not your everlasting Beauty. (p67 Holy Envy)

This, as Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to point out, is a plea, not for God’s unconditional love of us, which we can take for granted – it’s what God is – but for our unconditional love of God. We’re not here to earn our way to heaven or to appease God in some way, but to be as Christ is to God. Jesus enters his Father’s house, not to tidy it up a little, removing the obvious signs of idol worship here and there, but to replace it entirely with his own presence to the Father in an unmediated manner; a pure sacrifice offered to God, motivated neither by hope of heaven nor fear of hell, but by love of God. And so the sacrifice we bring is ourselves as the body of Christ. In this sense, we make the eucharist as much as the eucharist makes us. We’re here to love God as God loves us, and our neighbour as ourselves, Christ to one another and to God.

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