How many have heard of Emily Post? She was born sometime in the early 1870's and died in 1960. What made her famous was her book called ‘Etiquette’. This book, which ran through ten editions, taught people how to get along ‘politely’ in society!

Some of what she said was good. For example, how many of us have ever been to a fancy restaurant and been confused by the array of different knives, forks and spoons at our place! I haven’t been to too many fancy restaurants, with so much cutlery to choose from! But maybe you’ve seen the block-buster film ‘Titanic’ (1997) when Jack Dawson had been invited to dine 1st class with an extremely rich family and their friends, as a reward for saving the life of young, spirited Rose DeWitt Bukater. He sits down at table and says, looking at the array of knives, forks and spoons, “Are all these for me?” Which knife / fork / to use first, that’s the question! Well, Mrs Post wrote, “Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter which fork you use!” However, she also wrote (not only in terms of table manners, it seems!), “To do exactly as your neighbors do is the only sensible rule.” Someone else said this, in another way: “When in Rome, do as the Roman’s do!” Now, I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t necessarily seem very wise advice to me. Nor, in fact, does it sound very Jesus-like.

In our Gospel reading we have a picture of Jesus we don’t see very often, and doesn’t sound very Jesus-like. It’s the angry Jesus, the loud Jesus, the not so meek-and-mild Jesus. Let me set the scene for you. It’s Passover time. That’s the holy day celebrated in early spring, reminding the people of God’s deliverance from slavery in the land of Egypt, and of God’s fierce judgement ‘passing-over’ the homes of God’s people that had been marked with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. It’s a time of unleavened bread, lamb and herbs. It’s a time of sacrificial lambs and pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer prayer.

But it is more than evident that the sight that greets Jesus there that day, as he and his disciples arrive to prepare to observe Passover, angers him greatly. Verse 14 says that, in the Temple, Jesus finds traders, “Selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.”

I guess that none of this was bad in itself – to an extent the traders were providing an essential service to those who desired to make themselves ‘right’ before God. But, on the other hand, the traders were so many and took up so much space, they were making it impossible for people to worship God. What had begun with the intention of providing a service had, in fact, become a dis-service! It was drawing away from given purpose and reason to go to church/the temple. And Jesus sees this.

There is probably more to it as well. It is probable that the money-changers were including a very hefty exchange-rate for their service. It all smacks of these traders making large profits from the religious needs of the ‘faithful’. So, in his righteous anger, Jesus is acting against the double injustice that is, firstly, preventing the people from worshipping God and, secondly, cheating the worshippers by charging unfair exchange-rates. In his words and in his actions – in his anger – Jesus is rebelling against unjust practices that are preventing people getting close to God in worship. Is it the case, then, that God calls us to be ‘rebels’ too – that God calls us to do the opposite of “When in Rome, do as the Roman’s do!”

I like the story of a man who walked into a gift shop that also sold religious items. Near the cash-register there was a display of baseball caps bearing the logo ‘WWJD?’ He was puzzled over what these letters could mean, so he asked the person behind the counter.
She replied that the letters of the logo stood for ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ and was meant to inspire people not to make rash decisions, but rather to imagine – and emulate – what Jesus would do if they found themselves in a particular situation. The man thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, I’m sure Jesus wouldn’t pay $20.00 for one of those caps!”

So, there’s the question! What would Jesus do? Our Gospel verses today show us that, sometimes, Jesus ‘went against the grain’. Sometimes Jesus stood-up (for) God, and spoke-out against the unfair practices / attitudes of his day. Sometimes, Jesus was a rebel!

Jesus often challenged the church leaders of the day. He wasn’t afraid to point out when their teachings or practices ran against the truth of God’s Word. His actions were justified, and His attitude righteous, because He was about His Father’s business. Because He was faithful, because He was willing to challenge the religious status quo, he was arrested, beaten, and crucified. Unwittingly, what the leaders saw as punishment, God was fulfilling His will and promise on the cross of His Son, our Savior Jesus.

Now, is it possible for us to be a rebel – and be a Christian? That’s a question! And it seems that the answer is “Yes!” It seems that we can (and should) follow Jesus and rebel against unfair aspects of society and world affairs, and not be rebelling against God. Just look at the prophets of old, speaking out (at great personal risk) against injustice in their lives and times. Just look at Jesus in the Temple that day – he was considered to be rebelling, acting and speaking out against the unfair / unjust practices associated with his religion at his time – practices that prevented so many people from drawing close to God in worship and observing their religious duty. But Jesus was not rebelling against God. He wasn’t saying that the whole religious system was wrong and had to be thrown-out. He was saying that there were flaws and problems in how people were providing services associated with it – distorting and exploiting what God sees as holy – spending time with Him in worship!

So, sometimes as believers, we are called to ‘rebel’. I don’t mean rebel against God. I mean rebel against injustice – against that which is wrong, un-Godly. Sometimes God calls us to rebel against the way that everyone else has got used to doing (or not doing!) certain things. Sometimes we – as Christian people – are called to rebel against what others (sometimes the majority) believe to be right. So, let’s not do something just because it seems everyone else is doing it. Let’s not passively “When in Rome, do as the Roman’s do!” if we believe that there is a better way, a more just and fair way – a more Christ-like way (WWJD?).

But, there’s a caution here for us. As sinners, our anger is not always righteous, even if we think it is. The anger of man does not always match up with the righteousness of God. Take a look…(Video)

Why am I getting angry? What’s the purpose of my anger? Does our temple need to be cleansed that we may truly worship and serve God? Do I need to use the spiritual disciplines to get my actions and attitudes in line with God’s will? Is my zeal for the Lord and His house, or something else? What do I need to do specifically this Lenten season? Repentance – doing a 180!

So no, we don’t always have to be ‘mild.’ We don’t always have to ‘fit-in.’ We don’t always have to ‘do what our neighbors do’, as Emily Post suggested. As long as it is God that is leading us, we do whatever we have to do to follow God’s will. We can be rebellious, as long as the end result is to be more Christ-like. We should always make sure God has cleansed our temple, before we try to cleanse another. Thanks be to God, for the sacrifice and example of Jesus. May our zeal, faith, and actions be for the Lord and His house. In Jesus. Amen.