

Reflection for Lent 3 March 7th 2021 Saint John 2:13-22 (Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1.18-25)

There is nothing so good in this world that can't be spoiled by the sin and pride of human beings. So it seems with the Temple in Jerusalem. This sacred place was set on Zion's hill and was known as 'the joy of the whole earth' (Psalm 48:2). Pilgrims would sing, "I was glad when they said to me, 'let us go to the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1) and, at the restoration from Babylonian exile, Isaiah would say of Jerusalem and its holy hill, "You shall be a crown of beauty in the Lord's hand...no longer forsake, your name will be 'My delight is in her'." (Isaiah 62:2/4). After repeated national humiliations in the past it was the re-built Temple that was the focus of the Jewish nation and its religion. And because it brought pilgrims from across the world it was a significant boost to her wealth and prestige. Yet Jesus has a complex relationship with the Temple. In his childhood Jesus spoke to the bewildered Mary and Joseph, "why did you search for me, did you not know I would be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) On another occasion Jesus miraculously provided a shekel coin for the Temple tax for himself and Peter (Matt:17:24/27) and, on another his grief at the approaching doom of Jerusalem and its Temple is deep and heart-wrenching – "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not! Behold your house is forsaken." (Luke 13:34/35). So, when we come to this passage in St John we should beware taking a too simplistic view which asserts that Christ came *in order* to get rid of this national shrine. Of course, John was writing after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD but both John and the New Testament in general are clear that its downfall is because of the failure of the people who use it, especially their leaders, rather than the building itself or its worship. After all, didn't Jesus say of the poor widow who cast her last pennies into the treasury, she has given all that she had. He knew Temple worship could be a way of expressing extravagant and selfless love to God. So much was invested in that place.

Given that Jesus' relationship with the Temple is not just one of condemning it outright we need to consider where his judgement really falls. The truth was, sin and pride had spoiled the good purpose of the Temple. In Jesus' eyes it had become the bastion of a big lie that had to be exposed. This lie turned what should be a loving response to God's gracious promises into a 'trade' for His favour. The tokens of this gracious offer from God were found in the tablets of the ten commandments which lay in the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. These were to show us how to live that abundant life which puts good relationships with God and our neighbour at the centre. Instead, it had become an obstacle to that loving response and had exchanged free grace for a bargain of ritual obedience governed by an elite. This, in turn gave birth to pride, presumption, and privilege for the few who were in power. It is in this context that we see Jesus as the one showing people the way to come to God without any temple building but through his own gracious self-offering. As Jesus will later say to the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, "The hour is coming, and now is, that true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

We realise from the way John gives us this passage that it can only be fully understood from the perspective of the resurrection. The response that Jesus gives to his Jewish accusers is very puzzling to them and was only understood by the disciples themselves when they looked back after Jesus' death and rising. Some scholars suggest the 'three days' Jesus refers to must only mean 'I can re-build it in a trice' i.e. no time at all. This is not credible. We know (see my notes below) that Jesus' words were known by his friends and those who turned 'false witness' at his trial. There is no reason to evade their plain meaning and it is very hard to imagine the context in which they might have arisen after the resurrection unless they were in fact spoken by Jesus. It was after the resurrection that they came to understand this puzzling encounter, and now it made sense. They believed the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken. As always with John we are meant to take seriously the truth of the witness he gives us and that truth is given us so that it might elicit faith in the risen one.

When we invest so much in a place, an institution, a way of seeing the world, a way of seeing ourselves, it is so easy to fall into the same trap which left the Temple in ruins. Every one of these things may be good in essence but their lesser and contingent goodness become the object of our lives rather than the means to reaching towards the God whose goodness alone should be our desire. For that, no stones and mortar will do, no treasured ways of doing things or comfortable relationships which do not challenge us. The only true worship, that is, the only true focus of our being is to see God as he truly is and to accept, as he does, who we truly are. And who is God? The One who tabernacles and goes about with us.

With my prayers for you all as we continue our Lenten journey together. Richard.

Bible notes on our passage.

John's account of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is distinct from that found in the first three Gospels. I disagree with those who say John has taken their account and just re-positioned it at the beginning rather than the end of Christ's ministry. For a start, John's account, which follows the first miracle at the wedding in Cana, is set in a block of his own material which, owes nothing to the other three Gospel writers. Here, the incident doesn't follow the triumphal entry on the donkey, rather it makes an early statement of Jesus' claim to be the Son of the Father. There is a clear Messianic purpose at this early stage when Jesus defends his actions by saying, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up". This saying isn't found in the synoptics in this event but later it is an accusation recorded by them at Jesus' trial. (Mark 14:58, Matt 26:61, Matt 27:40, see also the accusation against Stephen in Acts 6:13/14) Then again, John doesn't use the key synoptic phrase 'you have made it a den of thieves'. In John's account it is not the *dishonest* dealing in the Temple but the very fact of the trade there. As he puts it, 'Take these things away. You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade' (The Greek word echoes our word 'emporium'). The trading would be carried on in the Court of the Gentiles and this was the only place to which they were permitted admission and their only chance to worship.

The money-changers converted the hated and blasphemous Roman coins with their idolatrous images and titles of Caesar for other money more acceptable. This was probably money of the city of Tyre which was the 'gold standard' of coins at that time. Jews were not permitted to produce their own coinage. There must have been money in it for the cashiers all the same and the point is, all of this trade could and should have been carried out beyond the Temple precincts, whether honest or not. Money put into the treasury was melted down so any image on it was destroyed. It is likely that the Romans would take a dim view of their coinage being treated in this way.

'It has taken forty six years to build this Temple and will you build it up in three days?'. Herod began the rebuild of the 'second' Temple in the eighteenth year of his reign - about 19 or 20 B.C. It was based upon the building raised by Zorubbabel and completed in about c. 513 B.C. Herod more than doubled the scale of the precincts and that building. Forty six years would bring us to about 25 or 26 A.D. for this Passover visit which came soon after the start of Jesus' ministry. The entire building was completed in 63 A.D. which was just seven years before its destruction on 30th August 70 A.D. and at the end of a four year long rebellion.

If John were borrowing the account from the other three Gospels he would be expected to use some of their key words such as 'money-changers', but he uses a different Greek word. John uses distinctive vocabulary at other key points and the English translation loses this distinction.

The most distinguishing mark is that John places this event at the beginning of his series of three visits to Jerusalem at the Passover. He therefore gives a progressive account of the mounting opposition to Jesus by the men in power in that city and this eventually leads to the Crucifixion. By comparison, apart from his baptism and temptation, Matthew, Mark and Luke shape Jesus' ministry around Galilee and its surroundings and only going up to Jerusalem for the final Passover and the climax of his death and resurrection. In many ways John's structure is more rounded and puts more stress on the Jerusalem authorities' case against him which built up over time rather than taking their lead from the provincial opposition arising from Galilee.

The clue to understanding John's outlook about Jesus and the Temple is found in his prologue. When he says, "the word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) the Greek word for 'dwelt' is properly translated 'tabernacled'. This is the very word for the tent of meeting which existed before the Temple and indicates God 'going about with us' or living among us wherever we go. If the Temple is meant to give expression to the presence of God then John wishes his readers to recognise that Jesus is that living presence by which the Father can be known.