

## **Sermon for Sunday 3 March 2024**

**Third Sunday of Lent Yea Exodus 20: 1 – 17; 1 Corinthians 1: 18 – 25; John 2: 13 – 22**

### **The Cleansing of the Temple**

Simon and I had a little break last week. We spent a few days in Chester. During that time we spent some time looking around Chester Cathedral. It's an ancient cathedral, which was a monastery first. It still has cloisters, and that was where we started. Later we had lunch in what had been the monks' refectory – a glorious light building – which must have been very cold in winter! A wonderful space. We could still see the stairs up to the nook where one of the monks would read while the rest were having their meals.

I've been trying to imagine how I would have felt if – as we were enjoying our simple but nourishing soup – we heard a sudden commotion coming from the gift shop. Someone in there with some kind of a whip made from rope. Flailing about, knocking down the stands of postcards and other religious gifts. Shouting,

driving people out. Telling people they had made his Father's house into a market place. We'd have been really scared – assumed that someone with mental health issues had come in. We'd have been shocked too - Deeply inappropriate behaviour for a cathedral – everyone else behaving very sedately – quietly looking at the gifts or eating lunch.

But this is just what Jesus did in our Gospel reading today. He wasn't in the heart of the Temple, the holiest place, the sanctuary – but in the outer court, the court of the Gentiles. This might translate quite well to the gift shop and café area of a cathedral in modern times. It was this place in the outer part of the Temple which came in for the white heat of His anger. But why?

Well, it's not entirely clear. The animals were there so that people could buy them to make their sacrifices in the Temple. The money-changers were there because Jewish people considered it unlawful to pay their Temple taxes in Roman currency. So they had to change their money into this currency. Were these people

selling for extortionate prices or making too much on the exchange of currency? It's possible. But we're not told that they were, any more than our cathedral gift shops and cafes are making unreasonable profits today.

So why is it that Jesus is so angry? His disciples remembered some words from Psalm 69, "Zeal for your house will consume me". They might also have remembered these words from Malachi "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple....but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." The descendants of Levi were the priests who still operated the sacrificial system in the temple. Surprisingly, they don't throw him out, but ask him for a sign to justify his behaviour.

Jesus replies, referring this time to his own body as the temple of the Lord. And this time, he uses

a different word for the temple – the word for the holiest, central part of the temple where God was present – not for the outer courts. Jesus says He is himself the place where God is.

Perhaps we're glimpsing here, in Jesus, the God who is present in the thunder, lightning and smoking of the mountain in our reading from Exodus. The God who gave the ten commandments; the God who is so terrifying that the people are afraid to approach the mountain and send Moses on his own. They are afraid to hear him speak directly. This is God who is uncompromisingly, fiercely, utterly holy. God who demands the absolute love, loyalty and worship of his people. God who tolerates no rivals in our love for him. That's the first and the second commandments!

It certainly makes me think that this reading comes on the day when we're going to bless and dedicate our new facilities in church. And start using them. So – what's the message in this for us?

Here are some thoughts.

We can certainly be grateful for God for the culmination of all the years of thinking and planning. We can be grateful to those who through hard work and self-sacrifice have made it possible.

But perhaps there's also a message about how we're to use our new facilities. Not just for our own enjoyment, convenience and comfort, but for the glory of God.

How can we use them to share the Gospel of Jesus, who calls us first to love God with all of our heart and soul and strength and secondly to love our neighbour as ourself?

How can we use them to preach Christ crucified – the power of God and the wisdom of God – the One who demonstrates God in all His fulness?

How can they help us to show to others something of the power, the glory, the holiness and the overwhelming love of God.

I don't have the answers, but I'm inviting us all to think about this.

Amen

### **Prayers of Dedication for our new Facilities**

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all those who have prayed, planned, worked and given generously over many years, so that we can provide these facilities. We thank you too for our architect, our builders, the Friends of St Michael's and our Building Development Group.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

O God, make the entrance of this this church wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to struggling feet, But rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power.

God make the entrance of this house the gateway to your kingdom.

In the name of Jesus.  
**Amen.**

O God, may our new kitchen be a centre of hospitality for all, a place of harmony, of service and of welcome, a place where you are present in the preparation of food and drink and in the enjoyment of company.

And may our toilet be of service to all who travel here from near and far and those who wish to spend time in the quiet of our lovely building.

In the name of Jesus.

**Amen**

Bless these new facilities, Lord, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and may they and we be a blessing to others.

**Amen**