

Sermon for Sunday 7 March 2021 – third Sunday of Lent – Exodus 20: 1 – 17; John 2: 13 - 22

Jesus was angry. Very angry. He had come to the Temple, the centre of worship for His people. His Father's house. He saw with His Father's eyes. What he saw looked more like a marketplace than a place of worship. He saw all the people selling animals for sacrifice at exorbitant prices; he saw the money-changers who made far too much profit from exchanging the local coinage for special Temple money - the only thing you could use within its precincts. And Jesus was angry. Not just because all of this commerce was irreverent, but because it was exploitative.

The Passover Festival was approaching – probably the greatest of the festivals for the Jews – a time of heightened emotion and expectation centred on Jerusalem. A time when Jews especially looked to the coming of the Messiah, hoping that he would lead them to freedom from their Roman rulers. Even today, during a Passover meal, the front door is often opened to check whether the prophet Elijah has come to announce that the Messiah is on his way.

Into all of this expectation strode Jesus. We're told, he made a whip of cords and literally drove out people and animals from the Temple, turning over the tables with their piles of coins. What noise there must have been. What a scattering. What disarray. I think I would have found it quite frightening – wondered whether perhaps Jesus had gone mad. No wonder the Temple authorities came running to see what all of the fuss was about.

This was a prophetic act. Many prophets in the past, including Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had raged against the injustices perpetrated by God's people, and especially by their religious leaders, who ought to have known better. Putting the love of money before the love of God or of neighbour was certainly not in line with the ten commandments. So Jesus carries out a symbolic cleansing of the Temple. He certainly makes his point.

Lent coincides with the time when we usually think of spring cleaning. Perhaps this year with lockdown your house is cleaner than usual. But in the Vicarage, as it gets lighter, we see what has been lurking in some of those dark corners through the winter - and decide that something has to be done about it. So we could think of Lent as a time for some spiritual spring cleaning too. In the early church it was a time of purification – and especially so for those candidates for baptism who were to be baptised on Easter Eve.

But our Gospel passage is about far more than tidying up the Temple – far more even than dealing with corruption and injustice. Jesus goes on to make an extraordinary statement. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2.19). He must have known he would be misunderstood. But he's still in prophetic mode. He's standing in the Temple, the place where God has dwelt with His people for many centuries. What He means is that His body is now the Temple of God, the place where God is present among His people. They are going to destroy his body, but it will be raised in three days. This is to be the sign that He has the ultimate authority. Not just the authority to decide what can or can't happen in the

Temple. This is a claim to be God on earth – much safer therefore to allow Himself to be misunderstood at this point.

What a shift – from God being present on earth in His Temple, to being present in Christ. No wonder those who were invested in the Temple, its rituals and processes and hierarchy, found it so difficult, if not impossible to follow Jesus. He appealed most of all to those who were marginalised, excluded and despised by the elite of His own people.

And here's another shift. Much later in the Gospel of John Jesus tells his disciples that he and the Father will come to dwell in them. Here's what Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (John 14: 23). That promise applies to all Christians including us. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus comes to live in our hearts. The apostle Paul takes up this theme in his letters and talks about the church collectively being the body of Christ, with Jesus as the head of the body. (1 Corinthians 12: 12f, Colossians 1: 18)

What an extraordinary act of humility and trust that God should come to dwell with us, within each of us. That we are now His Temple, that God chooses us to be His body. As Theresa of Avila famously said: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Jesus who was so angry at exploitation and injustice, especially of the poor and the marginalised, calls us to pray and work and speak for Him. That's the kind of Lenten spring cleaning that he's interested in.

I'm going to end with a prayer.

Lord Jesus, who came to your Temple to cleanse it,
come and cleanse our hearts and our lives.
Give us a longing for justice for those who are wronged and oppressed,
give us a longing for the flourishing of the whole earth,
teach us how to be your body here in this place,
and keep us close to you through your Holy Spirit.
Amen

Revd Diana Young 5 March 2021