

John 2: 13-22 **Jesus clears the Temple**

Grenoble, March 3rd, 2024, 3rd in Lent

readings: Exodus 20: 1-17 The Ten Commandments
John 2: 13-22 The cleansing of the Temple

Preamble

As I said last Sunday morning, I am not the permanent chaplain. I am a retired vicar from Edinburgh. Before retirement I was from 2000 to 2013 Chaplain in Lyon. Susie and I spent some time here in 2019 and 2020. Our much-loved daughter Joanna was part of the congregation in 1997.

Exodus 20: 1-17 The Ten Commandments

The pivotal event in the Old Testament, in God's dealings with his people, is the Exodus. God hears the prayers of his people, and under the leadership of Moses brings them out of bondage and slavery in Egypt; and leads them by degrees towards the Promised Land.

It is not a straightforward journey. After the crossing of the Red Sea they are led into the desert, a harsh and unforgiving environment. A place where they learn their dependence on God. And where, on Mount Sinai, they are given the Ten Commandments. **Note that:** God has **already** rescued them. Now he tells them how they are to live. I believe that is the pattern in our Christian life today: first God reaches out to us; and then he expects our lives and priorities to change.

Commentators point out: the first 4 commandments deal with man's relationship with God [worshipping him alone; not making idols; not taking his name in vain]; and the next 6 commandments deal with our relationships with other men and women [no murder; no adultery; no theft; no covetousness]. A reminder that our Christian faith has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Upwards to God; sideways to other members of his family.

John 2: 13-22 The cleansing of the Temple

One of the significant differences between John and the synoptic gospels is that while the synoptics give much space to the Galilean ministry of Jesus, John sets the greater part of his gospel in and around Jerusalem. **NB** John 2:12 tells us that, after the marriage at Cana, Jesus and his disciples, and his mother and brothers, went to Capernaum. Which the Synoptics generally speak of as the centre of Jesus's ministry.

Similarly, the synoptics place Jesus' cleansing of the Temple at the end of his ministry, towards the end of his life, following his entry into the city on Palm Sunday; but John, in today's gospel reading, places this incident right at the outset of Jesus' ministry. For which, as John Marsh points out, there is a theological explanation. John, writing from the far side of Easter, sees it as setting the scene for Jesus's ministry..

Commercialism

The physical setting is the Jerusalem Temple, the focal point of Judaism, of Old Testament religion; and the time is the Feast of Passover. The courts are filled with livestock – cattle, and sheep, and doves (v.13), because the pilgrims who came for the feast are required to offer these sacrifices. The money-changers are there (v.15) because the Temple tax had to be paid in Jewish currency; as Gentile coins [and Gentile people] were unacceptable in the courts of the Temple.

What is Jesus's response? He makes a whip of cords to drive out the animals [v.13], and overturns the tables. Coins everywhere. Chaos.

John 2: 13-22 The cleansing of the Temple

It is tempting [for me] to suggest that Jesus is condemning such business activities. A memory of being at St Giles High Church in Edinburgh: the church was closed for private prayer, but the church bookshop and the tea room were open ! I am as ready as anyone to say ***Down with crooked bankers and Lord Green*** ! [The chairman of HSBC when they were encouraging tax evasion.] But I'm not sure that is the thrust of this passage.

The justification for Jesus's behaviour in Mark's account [Mark 11] is a quotation from Isaiah: '*My house shall be a house of prayer for all the nations*' [Isa. 56:7]. What Jesus is doing is ridding the Temple of all the obvious removable symbols of a Judaism that kept the Temple to itself. In effect, Jesus is protesting that Israel has failed to fulfil her universal mission to mankind. To be "*a light to the Gentiles*".

"*Take these things away*" [2:16] is not merely [primarily] an attack on trade. It marks the transition from *sacrificial* worship to *spiritual* worship. This is fully in accordance with the words of Isaiah: "*I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs Stop bringing meaningless offerings ! Seek justice; encourage the oppressed ... plead the case of the widow.*" [Isa 1:11 et seq.]

What miraculous sign ... ? [v.18]

The Jews ask, *What sign have you to show us for doing this ?* [v.18].

To which Jesus responds, '*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*'. [v.18] [These are the exact words attributed to Jesus and raised at evidence against him at his trial in Mark 14 and Matthew 26.] And this reply goes right to the heart of John's Gospel. Three days would be understood as foretelling Jesus's death and resurrection.

"The resurrection was the sign that Jesus would offer his people for cleansing the temple for by his death and resurrection the narrow, nationalistic religion of the Jews would be replaced by the universal, inclusive gospel of Jesus Christ. And the related animal sacrificial offerings of Judaism would be replaced by the once-and-for-all offering of himself by Jesus Christ". [John Marsh]

Why does it come at the beginning of the gospel ?

It may be that there were two cleanings; one at the beginning, one at the end of Jesus's ministry. Unlikely to me. Donald Allister suggests that Jesus as a God-fearing Jew would have made an effort to be in Jerusalem every year for the Passover. But it is likely that John uses this incident to set Jesus's ministry [in both Galilee and Jerusalem] in its proper context. That Jesus was ***doing a new thing***. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus demonstrates that the water of Jewish purification ceremonies is to be replaced by the new wine of the gospel. So here, he emphasises that the sacrificial worship of the Temple, especially at such feasts as the Passover, will be replaced by a new spiritual worship centred on the miracle of the resurrection. Such as today's Communion service !

The Temple leaders ask on what authority Jesus is doing these things. When he says: "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days*" (v.20). They think he is talking about the building, which is still unfinished after 46 years of work.

But, after the resurrection (v.22) the disciples recall this incident; and they see that Jesus himself has taken the place of the Temple. We saw in our Christmas readings that the song of the angels ***Glory to God in the highest*** [Luke 2:14], traditionally associated with the Jerusalem Temple, is sung over the baby Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem. All the sacrifices were completed in Christ. God's dwelling with his people is completed in Christ. Which makes the Jerusalem Temple redundant.

Envoi

Is it OK for us to sell books or cakes or raffle tickets in church on a Sunday ? This passage neither condones nor condemns such activities. It tells us rather that our priority when we come into what we sometimes misleadingly call 'God's house' – our priority is to be ready to encounter God in and through Jesus Christ.