

Lent 3, Year B Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; **John 2:13-23**

God in the Neighbourhood

Well, that's interesting isn't it? Right in the beginning of his gospel John chooses to write about this incident in the temple. Whereas, Matthew, Mark and Luke, place it at the end of their accounts, in the week before Jesus's crucifixion, which actually seems quite likely, although theologian Professor Tom Wright makes a good case for thinking that it did happen at the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

Let's pray

When we read John we need to remember that he is not writing a history text book. He is writing, as he says in chapter 20 (verse 31) *so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* So his gospel is carefully constructed to this end. So it is no accident that he describes the temple incident here at the beginning of his gospel. John has a message he wants to get across at the outset.

In his gospel John introduces Jesus in two ways. First he is the Word: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* (John 1:1, 14) Or as Eugene Petersen puts it in *The Message: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.*

And secondly Jesus is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

So here is God in the neighbourhood and it is important to John to highlight the temple incident early in his gospel.

Let's imagine ourselves there.

We have only met Jesus once before, at a wedding party in Cana where the wine flowed extremely freely! He seems a really fun guy so we tag along with him and his disciples. We've been in the temple before, but not at Passover. Someone tells us not to expect it to be holy and peaceful as normal. This is Passover.

And they are right! The colonnade is full of animals, grain and doves for the sacrifices, tables for those selling and for the money changers. It is noisy, dirty and, oh! smelly - animals, people, dung, blood....

But then it has to be. Passover is the time everyone wants to come to the temple into the presence of God and bring a sacrifice. And we cannot bring our lamb, cattle or doves with us all the way from Galilee, can we? Passover is also an opportunity to pay the obligatory annual temple tax. It has to be paid in the temple currency, not the Roman coins we use for everyday life - hence the money changers.

But what is Jesus doing? He seems to have got hold of some cord from somewhere. And he is twisting it into - what? -a whip! Really?! Now he's using it to drive the animals out of the temple! He's tipping the money changers' coins onto the floor and overturning their tables! He orders the dove sellers to take them out.

The Lamb of God has become a roaring lion! It's shocking! But he's not out of control. No one, no animal, is injured, nothing is broken. His actions make little in the way of disruption to what is going on; it's a symbolic statement. And he is acting with a calm authority as if he is the one in charge.

And maybe he is. We hear him saying "*Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!*" and we remember hearing that John the Baptist said that Jesus is the Son of God.

So I guess he is right to feel precious about the temple, God's house, his Father's house. But there has to be a marketplace if the temple is to fulfil the requirements for sacrifices and sin offerings, doesn't there? There's nowhere else for it in the crowded narrow streets of Jerusalem.

Uh oh! The temple priests and law teachers are approaching. Now Jesus is going to be in for it. But no! They too seem to have been subdued by Jesus's obvious authority. They are not telling him - they are asking "*What sign can you show us for doing this?*" "You are being authoritative" they seem to be saying "but can you prove to us that the authority is rightfully yours?"

And Jesus answers them, but it's enigmatic. "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" The Jews in the temple don't understand it; it's taken 46 years so far to build the temple. Three days is an absolute impossibility.

The disciples didn't understand either until after Jesus's resurrection, when the three days reference suddenly became very obvious. Then they realised that the temple of which Jesus was speaking was not Herod's magnificent building but Jesus's own body, God in the neighbourhood.

So what is Jesus indicating here? This is about the New Covenant. The temple worship and sacrificial system are Old Covenant. They are soon to be superseded.

Jesus is foreshadowing the time fast approaching when his own sacrifice, his death on the cross, will supersede the annual

temple sacrifices. He is foreshadowing the resurrection when relationship will supersede place. When to respond to God's demands is by a sacrifice of praise.

There is no longer need for animal sacrifices because Jesus has done it all. The writer to the Hebrews writes, in chapter 10 (11-12):

Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God',... .

He sat down because there is no need for any further sacrifice involving the shedding of blood.

Take note of that sentence: *Every priest stands... offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.* The most that the worshipper in Herod's temple could expect was forgiveness for past sins; forgiven but still there.

For us it is different. Of the New Covenant God says in Jeremiah (31:34b)

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Hebrews 10:14 is one of my favourite Bible verses: *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.*

It tells us that Jesus by his sacrifice, his single offering, has perfected, that is, made complete, finished, perfected us Christians. We, who are so imperfect, in Christ are seen as perfect in God's eyes.

At the same time we are sanctified, or *are being sanctified*. as the King James version more accurately translates the Greek:

The paradox is that, through the sacrificial death of Jesus, we Christians are already perfect and at the same time being made more and more holy through the new covenant (Hebrews 10:16):

*This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds*

Transformation comes not by trying hard to obey God's commandments, but by the ongoing sanctification that Holy Spirit is bringing into our hearts. It is about working out our own salvation ... *for it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* (Philippians 2:12-13)

No wonder Paul writes in our Epistle today:

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Jesus has superseded the temple. The presence of God is no longer to be found only by entering a sacred building. In fact he doesn't live in buildings. His dwelling place is in us Christians - *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27). Wherever we go the presence of God goes with us. We ourselves are God in the neighbourhood.

So we do well to take care to cultivate an intimate personal relationship with him so that we will indeed be the aroma of Christ to the community around us (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Amen

Chris Shaw, 7 March 2021



The Merchants Chased from the Temple, by James Tissot
(Les vendeurs chassés du Temple) 1886-1894