

'Cleansing of the Temple'. Third Sunday of lent. A reading from the Gospel of John. Ch 2:13-22. Caroline Seaton.

I'd like you to imagine for a moment the following scenario. A church preparing for worship – people busy lighting candles, sorting out the sound system and power point, preparing for coffee after the service, getting the room ready for the children's activities. Preparations well in hand for a well-prepared act of worship when suddenly the Vicar bursts in and blows a gasket! He goes off into a tirade – 'what's it all for?' 'What are we doing?' 'Why are we doing it'? He pulls the fuse on the electrics and the place is plunged into chaos. Disbelief and silence follow. What had just happened?

Sounds like an unlikely event here at Christ Church, but we hear that such an outburst took place in our Bible reading. The version we used in Church was from the Lion Children's Bible and is actually from Matthew's Gospel, but has more dramatic visual effects than the reading from John, but the version from John really hits the crux of the event, with Jesus speaking of his sacrifice for us all.

"Destroy this Temple and I will raise it again in three days".

Jesus losing his rag. But why is the question. The scenario at the start is only a partly parallel to our events related in our Bible reading as nothing can do justice to what Jesus did in the temple, but hopefully puts us in the situation, so we can relate to it more. An astonishing scene which stunned all.

They were precious words which Jesus spoke, which were not fully understood at the time. Fortunately, we have had over 2000 years to acknowledge these words which have become the core of our being, as Christians.

Interestingly, John puts this retelling of the incident at the start of his Gospel whilst the other Gospel writers put it almost at the end of their writings following Jesus triumphal into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They are writing from different perspectives, but all include this as an important incident in the Jesus life.

Is John proclaiming Jesus' status as the Son of God right at the start of his Gospel? Holding nothing back?

This recalling of Jesus showing his displeasure highlights the actions of those who held authority at the time and their misuse of the Law. This was quite possibly the cause of Jesus frustration. The Law of the land was being misinterpreted and God's words were not being heard and were not being obeyed.

It was the Passover festival and people were crowding into Jerusalem. Despite being scattered throughout the world, it was the aim of all Jews to attend the celebration at least once in Jerusalem, as Jerusalem and the Temple were the beating heart of Judaism. The centre of society and indeed the place where Israel's God YHWH had promised to live in the midst of the people. So it was a captive audience for those who sat in the Temple, holding court. Everyone who attended for the Temple festival had to bring either money or an animal as a gift offering, often one of their few animals or their last shekel but it was something they wanted to do as an offering to God. On arrival Temple inspectors called 'mumcheh' who were appointed to examine the animals which were to be perfect and unblemished, but they often found them not to be so. This meant people would have to buy or exchange them within the temple walls at a rate of exchange higher than usual. Similarly with the coins, they were not the right ones, so had to trade them for worthy Temple coins. And seeing an opportunity to make a shekel or two the money exchangers didn't hold back! This wasn't in itself wrong. The Hebrew term 'Talmud' which is the study or learning of, refers to a compilation of ancient teachings as sacred and normative by traditional religious Jews which does state that it was ok for a small gain to be made. But in this case Jesus was seeing the blatant abuse of poor people and a shameless social injustice, done in the name of religion. This so outraged Jesus, John tells us he made a whip out of cord, driving out all from the temple courts, scattering the coins, turning over the tables with these words to the sellers of doves and other traders - "Get these out of here! Stop turning my

Father's house into a market place!" Again, a difference here in John's Gospel. His words in his passage say, "my father's house" whilst the other three gospel writers just say "my house".

There were many courts in the Temple where people could go but the first one was the only part where the gentiles could worship. The other inner temples were the Court of women, Court of the Israelites and then the Court of Priest. And with all the cacophony going on, the atmosphere didn't lend itself to any meaningful worship preventing the gentiles who had been touched by God seeking prayer.

Because Jesus Loved God so much, he loved God's children and he found it impossible to stand by and watch the people being treated so badly.

Jesus' anger was fuelled by the fact that the Temple was being desecrated. Not just because of the trading going on which wasn't unusual, but the injustices he saw. And because of this he saw worship without reverence. And Jesus acted as he did in order to show that the whole paraphernalia of animal gifts to be sacrifice was irrelevant. They were not important to God. For centuries, prophets had been saying a similar thing. In Isaiah ch 1 v 11-13 we hear

'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats..... bringing offerings is futile'. Similar words echoed in Jeremiah, Hosea and from psalm 51.

Jesus acted as he did to show that no sacrifice of any animal can ever put a person right with God. But the Temple authorities and Jewish traders hadn't remembered or chose to ignore these words. Wealth had become the focus of their worship.

Jesus could see the inequality and injustice being done to those who were poor and the flagrant disregard by those who should have known better! This prompted him to say 'Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up again in three days'

In response to Jesus' words, the question asked by the authorities is "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Despite all the words of the OT prophets and the signs Jesus had shown, the chief priests and pharisees didn't want to believe in the presence of God and still demanded proof as to whose authority he spoke.

"It has taken 46 years to build this Temple, and you are going to raise it in three days"?

But of course, Jesus wasn't talking about the physical building. He was talking of his death to all who would listen. This passage has so much in it, and we have hardly scratched the surface. But hopefully we can take from it our need to hear God's word becoming the total focus of our lives, and through this show Gods love, God's care and compassion to all people.

After all, God's word, God's love for all is more precious than silver or gold and something we strive to share with all those we come into contact with. God wants the sacrifice of ourselves, of our hearts and our minds. Amen