

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 4TH MARCH 2018
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Today's OT reading reminds me of the story about the elderly Scot who told his parish minister that he was about to go on holiday to the Holy Land. "And when I'm there," said he "I'm going to climb to the top of Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments out loud!" The minister gave him a long look and then said "Ach, Sandy – ye'd be better tae bide at home and keep them!" We'll return to the Commandments later!

Although winter is lasting rather longer than expected this year, at the beginning of March we are usually being made aware of the necessity to do a bit of spring cleaning, both indoors and out. The brightness and freshness and emerging new life in the natural world are an invitation to get to work in the garden, cutting down the remains of last year's dead rubbish, pulling out the weeds that are choking new growth, preparing the ground for new plants to grow and flourish. And sunshine, flooding through windows which we suddenly realise need a good clean, shows up the accumulation of dust in dark corners. How appropriate therefore, that the Gospel reading for today, the third Sunday of Lent, should be that passage known as the Cleansing of the Temple, because this season of Lent is the right time to be doing a bit of spiritual spring cleaning too.

It's a dramatic story which presents Jesus in a very different, and less comfortable light than maybe we're entirely happy with. This is not the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, but a confrontational Jesus, expressing righteous anger in violent physical action. And of all places, in the Temple. In his commentary on this passage Tom Wright succinctly sums up what the Temple meant to the Jews of Jesus' day. He says: **"The temple was the beating heart of Judaism. It was the centre of worship and music, of politics and society, of national celebration and mourning. It was also the place where you would find more animals (alive and dead) than anywhere else. But towering above all these, it was the place where Israel's God, YHWH, had promised to live in the midst of his people. It was the focal point of the nation, and of the national way of life."** And this is the place where an unknown young prophet from Galilee comes in and turns everything upside down.

An unknown prophet? Surely that can't be right; because this incident is also described by the other Gospel writers, all of whom place it after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem at the end of a three-year ministry, when he is hailed by the crowd as the promised Messiah. So why does John place it at the beginning of his gospel? The answer is that each of the gospel writers concentrated on different aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry and assembled their material accordingly. They were more concerned about **what** Jesus did and **why**, rather than on **when** he did it. Matthew, Mark and Luke present the Cleansing of the Temple as one of the culminating incidents which inflame the Jewish authorities and hasten Jesus' arrest and trial. John presents it as one of the early signs of what Jesus' ministry is all about; not least it's an indication that he's going to turn concepts of God and worship upside

down, and bring a new meaning to Passover, that most important of all the Jewish festivals.

At whatever time this incident happened, it poses two questions. Firstly, what was so wrong with the Temple that Jesus was driven to such furious action? And secondly, what relevance does this story have for the Christian Church of the twenty first century?

On the face of it, there are easily understandable reasons for Jesus' actions. It all takes place in the outer court of the Temple, the Court of the Gentiles, where Jews who have come from all over the world to celebrate Passover must change their particular currency into shekels in order to pay the obligatory Temple tax, and they are being systematically fleeced by the money changers, who charge an exorbitant rate of interest, and keep a hefty profit for themselves. And that's not the only extortionist racket. Many of the Passover pilgrims have brought their own animals and birds for sacrifice. This livestock has to be inspected, and there's a charge for the inspection which usually results in rejection because they're not sufficiently pure and unblemished, and the pilgrims then have to buy other sacrifices from temple stock at vastly inflated prices. Far from the atmosphere of reverence appropriate to a holy place, this outer court resounds with noise, not only the voices of the crowd and the animals, but above all the chink of money! No wonder Jesus says **"Take all this out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market place!"**

But we have to look a bit deeper than that. Jesus isn't just condemning abuses of the Temple system – he's challenging the system itself. A system which makes a profitable business out of religious observance, and turns the house of God into a noisy, irreverent market rather than a place of prayer; a system that demands costly and pointless animal slaughter to buy God's forgiveness; a system which is so embedded in man-made rules and practices that the God for whose honour and glory the Temple was built in the first place seems to be taking a very back seat -and indeed the whole structure of the building says quite a lot about **that**. It's built in a series of courts, one within the other. The outer Court of the Gentiles is open to everyone and anyone; but no one who isn't a Jew can go beyond that point, on pain of death. Then comes the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Men of Israel, then the Court of the Priests, at this Passover time awash with the blood of sacrificial animals, and finally the Holy of Holies where God is safely tucked away, inaccessible to all but the High Priest, and to him only once a year on the Day of Atonement. God is kept at a distance – and not only from his own people. In Mark's version of this story, Jesus says **"My house shall be called a house of prayer - for all nations."** But any Gentile who comes to the Temple searching for God is on a highroad to nothing. It's all a far cry from those Ten Commandments, the covenant charter between YHWH and his people, when He instructed them to turn their backs on all other comforts and securities and rely solely on Him; when He commanded them to forget the accepted rules of power and domination, and to build a society of peace and justice and fair dealing for all. No wonder Jesus was angry!

So – in the light of all that, in this period of Lent we need to ask ourselves some hard questions both as individuals and as the Church. Are we ever tempted to keep God separate from our everyday lives, safely tucked away in a building that we only visit on Sundays? How far are we embedded in the man-made rules and practices which govern our worship, but which actually keep God at a distance from many in the wider community? How reluctant are we to explore new forms of service which might help outsiders to make some meaningful contact with him, and which could open to all of us new opportunities to further his kingdom in the world? And are we ever tempted to look on any sacrifices we make as bargaining chips with which to buy God's blessing, rather than making them for love of Him and of our fellow men?

Last Sunday Lucinda talked about priorities. And important as all the financial, administrative, and organisational aspects of our church life are, that question now arises again. Do we always get our **priorities** right? In 2011, a Sit-In was organised outside St Paul's Cathedral to protest about problems of financial malpractice and injustice and the effects of these things on society as a whole. There were, of course, valid arguments both for and against the site of this demonstration, but significantly two reasons why the Cathedral authorities finally decided to have the protestors **forcibly** removed were firstly, that some services were having to be temporarily suspended because **protests about injustice were interfering with the worship of God** – how's that for a contradiction in terms! - and secondly that **the Cathedral was losing money because the tourists couldn't get in**. It's not surprising that in considering their Christian priorities, both the Canon Chancellor and the Dean tendered their resignations.

When Jesus is asked for a sign which justifies his actions he says **“Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up.”** Of course, those who are listening have no idea that to Jesus his body is the Temple of God. Even the disciples only understood that after the resurrection. With the Cleansing of the Temple Jesus is foretelling an end to the status quo. His Passover self-sacrifice as the Lamb of God will pay once and for all for the sins of the world and his risen, living presence will give new life to all who believe. Our contact with God, our approach to him, our entry into his presence will not henceforth be dependent on man made systems, or anything built by human hands, because all those who believe will themselves be living Temples, the dwelling places of the risen Lord. And the living temples must be governed by those Ten Commandments which in a nutshell are – **love God with all your heart, and your neighbour as yourself**. What better time then, than this season of Lent, to put our lives in order, both as individuals and as the Church, and to clear out anything and everything that would prevent us from being fit dwelling places for God in the person of his Son.

Amen