

## Reflection for Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021 (The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent)

### Bible reading:

*John 2.13-22*

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

### Reflection

One of my childhood memories is going to visit the marketplace in Newark where I grew up. It was a big, cobbled square with traders shouting out things like 'Three pound of apples for 10 pence' or 'Come and get your fresh fish 'ere'. It was a fascinating place for a small boy, full of excitement and things to discover. It was noisy and bright, sometimes with a bit of pushing and shoving to get the best bargains and the occasional argument over something that turned out to be not such a good bargain after all.

I wonder if that's what the atmosphere was like in the temple courts with people coming from all over Israel and beyond at the great festival times. There would be people changing money into coins that didn't have any human image stamped on them and people buying and selling animals that the visitors would take forward into the inner courts to be sacrificed. And into this hive of activity comes an angry Jesus turning over tables and driving them out. 'How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!' he says.

In John's gospel account, this story is told near the beginning, just after the wedding at Cana and before the encounter with Nicodemus. In the other gospels it comes near the end of Jesus earthly ministry as he enters Jerusalem a week before his death and resurrection. So when did it happen, or were there two occasions? The simple fact is that we don't know. We also have to remember that were looking at first century documents through twenty first century glasses. Anyone writing history today would be expected to write an account in chronological order. But the gospel writers weren't writing a history book. They were concerned with 'what it means' so it was perfectly normal for stories to be included in a place that enabled people to understand their deeper meaning. It's a bit like 'flashbacks' that are sometimes included in modern films to enable us to understand how the story reached it's present point.

The re-building and expansion of the temple was a project that was begun by Herod the Great in 19BC and was mostly complete by around 27AD. Hence the reason Jesus is told that it took 46 years to build it.

It had a series of courts where only people of various levels of ritual purity were allowed to go. The outermost one was where anyone, Jew or Gentile was allowed to go. This was also where the money changers and the market stalls were. Then there were courts where only Jewish people were allowed to go. Then only Jewish men, then only priests, then only priests from the tribe of Levi. There are inscribed stones from the wall around the second court that have survived to this day. They threaten a penalty of death to any non-Jewish people who transgress into the area where they are not allowed. The whole system of the temple was defined by those who were not allowed!

In our society today things are perhaps a little bit less obvious but there are still lots of ways and lots of places in which people are excluded. There are the barriers created by poverty, by prejudice, by snobbery, by fear of those who are different, who don't live or behave or just don't think like we do.

And just like in Jesus' time, it's so much easier to notice the situations in which we are excluded than the ones in which we exclude others. There's an old saying that when you're a corporal the world seems full of sergeants, when you're a sergeant, the world seems full of officers. We notice the injustice of those who seem to have it better than us but not the other way around. In that court of the gentiles, 2000 years ago, people would be thinking about getting the right animal to pass on to the priest for a sacrifice and getting the right coins to pay the temple tax: thinking about where they were going next. They wouldn't be thinking about the noise and the hustle and bustle that would make it more difficult for the gentiles to have an encounter with God in the only bit of the temple where they were allowed.

It seems ironic that people would be making sure they changed their money because coins with human images were idolatrous and be totally unaware of the people whose only option was to worship God in a market place.

Only Jesus is looking in the other direction; thinking about the holiness of God being right here in this place rather than in moving on to encounter God in the next place where others are excluded. If Jesus were walking the earth today, where would he be looking?

Lent is a good time for a clear out!

What are the things that like using the right coins in the temple - things that have become too important to us? So important that they make barriers for others.

Maybe we hold onto worship that is how we like it to be with the words that are familiar and songs or hymns that we like but never notice that those things that make us feel comfortable, make others feel like outsiders.

Maybe we notice that someone in a shop or on the street has been rude or off-hand and our thoughts are about the minor hurt we have had rather than the possibility that the other person is carrying some much greater hurt.

Take some time this Lent to think about what needs a clear out and to see what Jesus sees in the people and things around us every day.