

Sermon - Zeal for the house of the Lord

Based on Exodus 20.1-17 and John 2.13-22 (NRSV)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

God 'pitches his tent' among us

- One of the first aspects of the Gospel story that might intrigue us is that in the other Gospel accounts Jesus' cleansing of the temple is described after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem not long before his crucifixion, and yet here in John's account it is described near the beginning, in chapter two.
- So we might ask why there is this apparent difference in the order of events across the three years of Jesus' ministry.
- It is good to remind ourselves that we live in an era of science, when things are measured, not only in terms of size and weight, but also in time.
- We understand the truth in terms of scientifically verifiable facts, and documented evidence.
- It has become important to determine truth in the order of events and communications.
- Then we bring this mindset to the writings from other eras, when truth was measured or described in other ways.
- So we might look at this discrepancy between John and the other Gospel accounts - the synoptic Gospels - and either think that John's Gospel might in some ways not be true, or factually correct, or that there is some other complicated explanation whereby someone rearranges the puzzle pieces of the Gospel, and forces a fit of some kind.
- A simple answer is that while the synoptic Gospel writers were focused on a chronological sequence of events - at least, in terms of the general picture - John is focused on a theological sequence.
- John's ordering of events describes a *theological* truth that runs through the whole of his Gospel account.
- Whereas the other Gospel writers only show Jesus turning up for the Passover in Jerusalem once, right at the end of his ministry, John describes Jesus as being in Jerusalem for each annual Passover in his three years of ministry.
- This first time, then, takes place near the start of his ministry, and immediately demonstrates what John poetically describes in the first chapter, that:
the Word became flesh and [pitched his tent] among us (John 1.14)
- John makes it clear that this did not happen with the death and resurrection of Jesus, but rather it was made manifest - made apparent, realised - with the baptismal anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit.
- So in John's account, straight after Jesus is baptised, he calls Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael - and then, symbolically on the third day, attends a wedding in Cana where he helps to ensure that the celebration of the wedding is blessed.
- That first miracle in John's account - the transforming of water into the drink of joyful celebration - is part of John's thematic emphasis of heaven being a celebration of the marriage feast of the Lamb.
- The next event is Jesus zealously clearing the temple, as we've heard in today's passage.

The temple context

- It is helpful to describe parts of the temple, and aspects of the worship conducted there, to understand the context of Jesus' actions.
- The innermost chamber of the temple (the holy of holies), then the sanctuary and the porch to the sanctuary were the most sacred parts, with only special access granted to priests.

Sermon - Zeal for the house of the Lord

- Proceeding outwards were various courts: the Court of Priests, then the Court of the Israelites reserved for ritually pure Jewish men, and then the Court of the Women.
- Finally, the outermost courtyard was the the Court of the Gentiles - and it was here that Jesus engaged with the livestock traders and money changers.
- They were there for good reasons.
- Firstly, they were a 'fast offering' service - a bit like a fast-food service.
- A worshipper travelling to Jerusalem didn't have to transport a suitable animal with them all the way from home: they could buy one when they arrived there.
- Secondly, one couldn't use the standard Roman or Greek coinage to pay the temple tax, since these had images on them, or blasphemous inscriptions such as one that proclaimed the divinity of the emperor.
- So one would need to exchange the common money into Jewish currency, and the money changers provided an important service to worshippers.

Balancing worship with the facilitation of worship

- It is important to understand then, that Jesus was not trying to shut down their activities when he tells them:

'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' (John 2.16)

- Rather, he was objecting to these activities taking place *within* the temple precinct.
- They had previously operated outside, but had been allowed to move in, to the Court of the Gentiles.
- I think that there is a lesson here for any church community to take into careful consideration - which is to be aware of how that church prioritises worship alongside the practical activities that facilitate the worship.
- It stands to reason that we attend to practical matters of stewardship, regarding finance and property - and indeed, in the Anglican church we have the office of churchwarden whose primary responsibility is in attending to the parish's stewardship of finance and property.
- Nevertheless, these are to be in service of the worship of God, and the manifesting of God's kingdom on earth.
- This last point includes the missional aspect of our church life - the sharing of God's blessing with others, and inviting others to participate in that sharing, and in the worship.

Obstacles to worship

- Which brings us back to a fundamental point about Jesus' action that many commentaries overlook.
- The different temple courts that brought worshippers into closer proximity to the holy presence allowed for different categories of worshippers.
- So the Court of Priests was only for priests, and the Court of the Israelites only for Jewish men - who were ritually clean, and thus worthy of coming that close to the presence.
- The Court of Women enabled Jewish women to worship - just not as close as the men, and the outermost Court of the Gentiles enabled God-worshippers who were not Jews to participate in worship as well.
- The problem with the sellers of sacrificial livestock and the money-changers was that they were taking up the only space available to any non-Jewish worshippers.
- Not only space, but generating a lot of noise, and smells, and bustle that would interfere with anyone's worship.
- In short, they were presenting obstacles to people intent on worshipping God and being encouraged in their faith.

Sermon - Zeal for the house of the Lord

- And those who were responsible for the practical running of the temple didn't have a problem with this - presumably because there was some kind of material benefit for them.
- Maybe, like many fairs and markets today where each stall holder pays the organisers a space rental fee, the money-changers and livestock sellers were charged rental fees to operate their businesses inside the temple precinct.

Breaking the second commandment

- But ultimately, even though they appeared to be providing a convenience that had a religious benefit, what they were allowing was a direct contravention of the Second Commandment:
You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (Exodus 20.4-5)
- We might make the mistake of thinking of idols merely as statues that are assumed to be a divine embodiment, rather than as a representation of an aspect of the divine.
- We might look at other religions, especially so-called primitive religions, and regard physical representations as idols - and so completely miss the point of the second commandment.
- Because the reality is that anything we give priority to over our faith connection with God - that we treat as being more important than God - is effectively an idol.
- For example, if our own ceremonial and our furnishings and vestments become more important to us than our faith relationship with God, then we would have turned these aspects that are supposed to *facilitate* our worship of God, into *idols* that have greater priority than God.
- And so those responsible for running the temple in Jerusalem had likewise turned commercial activity that was supposed to facilitate the worship of God.
- So Jesus enters into that sacred space - the place meant for worship by those who were of least worthiness, but still supposedly welcome - and removes the idols of commercial gain, restoring the space for its original intended purpose.
- John reveals Jesus not only as the one who re-establishes the real presence of God in their midst, but also looks out for the least important, the least worthy, and lets everyone know that the least are also explicitly welcome and invited to enjoy the blessing of the real presence.
- And he puts those in authority who have permitted those obstacles to worship on notice with his fierce zeal.

Making others welcome to worship

- It is important that any church community, and indeed ourselves here at St John's, consider how we look out for those who might be regarded as being less worthy of welcome here - or might feel not worthy enough to worship here.
- Without exploring this in detail here, it is nevertheless relevant for us to consider our own implied 'Court of the Gentiles' - the entry spaces immediately outside and inside the main doorway, and reassess them in terms of the welcome - or not - they provide visitors and strangers.
- We have many different community service groups meeting here during the week, and many of them value the unstated connection with the sacred space.
- We need to reflect on how more welcoming we can make our sacred space - not only for when we have services here, but also in between times, when people sometimes come in and meet with God, quietly and privately.
- Indeed, our parish's Mission Action Team are actively exploring ways to do exactly this, and will value your support to achieve this once some ideas have been worked out.

Sermon - Zeal for the house of the Lord

So may you be challenged by the zeal of Jesus to reflect on where you might be prioritising other things over your faith connection with God.

May you be taught by the action of Jesus to take action yourself, and engage in the transformation God calls you to.

And may you be inspired by the Spirit of Jesus to enable others to more easily encounter and worship our living God.