

## Janice's Sermon - Sunday 7 March 2021

That's Shocking! Hard for us to fully comprehend quite how shocking this would have been in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine.

The shock for us is possibly more in seeing Jesus – the one who is often portrayed as meek and mild, calm and unruffled, - seeing him angry, whipping the animals out and violently overturning the tables – this is that same Jesus! This passion and zeal and anger is as much part of his character as is his love and gentleness and mercy.

The shock for these first century Jews who witnessed this outburst was more to do with *where* Jesus expressed such feelings. In the middle of the temple courts!

How dare he!

Interesting to note their challenge to Jesus is not 'why are you doing these things?' But 'by what authority do you do this?'

It's almost as if they did actually realise that Jesus had a point!

I wonder if there had been a growing discomfort with some of the Jews at the way the temple was being used. I can imagine a slow infiltration of these trading habits over time.....slowly encroaching on the holy ground, maybe someone sets up a stall at the gate, then someone sets up a stall just inside the gate and then another a little further in – each time authorities allowing one then another, not challenging cos not a big deal and then over time without realising the stalls are all over the temple court – maybe those present when they saw what Jesus did, came to a sudden realisation of what they'd allowed to happen, how the small subtle steps of leniency had ended in the temple being overrun?!

I think we can often find ourselves in a similar situation with our behaviour and attitudes. Like the metaphor of the frog in water – put it in boiling water it will jump out immediately and hop away, but put it in cold and heat it up little by little – the poor frog doesn't notice the change until it's boiled alive!

We may take a guilty little deviation from what we know to be right, then there's no comeuppance – no bolt of lightning, and then a bit later a little further stretching of the boundaries, which becomes easier and easier, and then before we realise, our boundaries are completely out of synch with what we know to be true and a behaviour that once might have shocked us, now is the norm and even acceptable, particularly if it reflects the society in which we live! Might be with little white lies or gossiping about people, it might be looking at pornographic images, or just one more glass of G&T, or could be a good thing we used to do but no longer can be bothered, bit by bit, behaviour changes but we're oblivious to it. We need a wakeup call. Like Jesus's shocking behaviour in the temple.

Lent is the perfect for us to reflect and review our behaviour and attitudes and to bring them back in line with God's holy ways.

Let's take a moment now to reflect as we listen to the song 'Jesus we enthrone you'. let's think about whether there is anything that Jesus wants to confront in us and then Nicki will lead us in an act of confession.

### **Confession & absolution**

SO Jesus makes this shocking challenge,

In response to the pharisees protest, Jesus gives a rather cryptic reply. "Destroy this temple and in Three days I will raise it again!" Easy for us to get what Jesus is talking about, destroy, 3 days, rise up! – it's

obvious - Jesus was referring to his coming death and resurrection, putting himself in place of the temple. But we've got the advantage of hindsight. At the time, for those present, it would have seemed an outrageous claim – restore this temple in 3 days when it's already taken 46yrs to build and it's still not finished!

John tells us this cryptic claim only became understandable to the disciples after the resurrection, then they remembered and it began to make sense. There was a dawning realisation for the disciples that the temple, *the House of God*, was being replaced in Jesus himself.

And this theology of a human body as a temple developed after Pentecost when the HS was poured out upon Jesus' followers. So in the thinking of the early church, as we can read in Paul's letters, all those who turned to Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit became temples of God themselves, which also applies to us 2 millennia later.

So what does this mean for us? What was the role of temple and what are the implications for us as living temples now?

Most importantly, the temple was the dwelling Place of G's presence –

But surely, I hear you ask, isn't God everywhere? Omnipresent? Certainly the testimony of the Bible suggests that: Jeremiah 23:24 DO I not fill the heavens and the earth? Beautiful words of Psalm 139 that we heard in the sung introduction to the service, which suggest that there's nowhere we can go where God isn't already. That is indeed true.

But as with so many of the Christian teachings there's a tension, a paradox, to be held that whilst God is universally present everywhere, God is also more present in particular places. That too is the testimony of the Bible.

God's glory was seen to be present in a much more particular way in the temple itself – it was the house of God.

In pre-temple times, Moses was instructed to build a tabernacle – a tent for the dwelling place of God. As the Israelite people progressed through the wilderness, God went ahead of them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night but when they set up camp, the tabernacle was erected and God's glory, God's presence descended and settled in the Tabernacle. This was known as the tent of meeting – where Moses and the priests could go to meet with God, to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. God was particularly present in the tabernacle.

This temporary structure housed the Ark of the Covenant and was known as the house of God for nearly five centuries.

King David, wanted to build God a more permanent structure in thanksgiving for all He had done for his people, but God declared that D was not the one to build him a house but his son Solomon would do so - and that's what Sol did (you can look up the story in 1Kings6-7) and when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the temple, the cloud of the glory of the lord filled the temple. In Solomon's dedication he gives voice to this paradox - he acknowledges that heavens cannot contain God, how much less this temple I have made but let your name dwell here. God's response was yes!

Rabbis of first few centuries BC, the time between old and new testaments of Bible, used word Shekinah to describe this sense of God's presence and glory, root of dwells/abide/resides. Whilst God was omnipresent, I imagine that in a sort of ethereal way, God also dwelt, rooted himself in a particular place.

When Jesus referred to himself as the Temple of God he was claiming that God dwelt/resided within him. And in the developed theology of each of Jesus' followers being temples of the Holy Spirit, whilst God is still present in the world about us, no place God isn't, in a more particular way God also dwells/abides/is rooted in the hearts of those believe and follow him and even more so in the body of believers. Paul says together we are being built into a temple

So what are the implications of this? How can we experience the truth of God's presence dwelling within us? Let me use a personal example.

Recently I've been feeling rather unsettled, as you can imagine. Not only with the pandemic and the lockdown and all the associated limitations and frustrations that puts upon us. As most of you know my time as curate in Tidenham is drawing to a close and I'm having to face the reality of a very uncertain future both personally and for the work and ministry I'll be leaving behind but which is still so close to my heart. It's easy to allow these uncertainties and concerns and fears to worry at my mind and cause angst and dis-ease.

But a knowledge of the presence of God deep in my heart calls me to a different way of approaching these circumstances. God does not want me to live my life in an anxious state, he calls us to trust him, but trust needs deliberate toning and exercise to become a default position.

Last week Nicki gave an inspired idea of a regular alarm call through the day to remember God, I know really caught the imagination of a number of people. That regular tuning in to the presence of God can sustain and energise our daily life. But when things begin to get tough I suggest we may need something more.

I've found that in these unsettling times I need to go deeper as well.

I had the idea of a metaphor, Imagine an ocean with waves on surface but deep near the ocean bed there's a quiet stillness, though probably still with powerful currents which carry you. Life with God can be like that.

I suggest that the regular stopping moments to remember and tune in to God are like snorkelling! Taking a breath and dipping your head below the surface to see the amazing wonder of what's below and it helps us to get a better perspective on the life we're living. Snorkelling is great in a calm peaceful sea.

But as the waves begin to build up and crash over you (like the circumstances of life) it may be more appropriate to go deep sea diving instead! To take a tank of oxygen and dive down to the depths to experience and explore the vastness and awesomeness of the ocean floor, away from the pounding waves above.

A couple of years ago on retreat I was taught an ancient spiritual contemplative way of praying called centring prayer which helps us to engage deeply with the Spirit of God within. Contemplative or centring prayer is like the deep sea diving, sinking into the very being of God deep within your soul – an experience that will impact the way you view and deal with the waves on the surface.

It may be something you'd like to try. I was surprised at how valuable I have found it. Being a bit of an activist extrovert I've always assumed that contemplative, silent ways of praying were not for me! However, I was mistaken and these ways of connecting deeply with God actually enable me to be more effective as an extrovert activist and help me not to be such an insensitive bulldozer!

I've described this centring prayer, very simply, in a separate video which you can access on YouTube or there's a post on Instagram or a printed document which you can download off the website or ask to be sent to you.

SO the temple is the dwelling place of God's presence and each of us, who believe and follow Jesus, is his temple. By taking time out to connect with his presence deep in our hearts, helps develop the spiritual muscles to withstand the crashing waves on the surface of daily life. It gives us the resources to resist the anxieties and worries and contributes to a healthy sense of well-being.

We're going to pause now as Nicki leads us in an affirmation of faith, by which we declare our identity as believers in Christ and temples of his Holy Spirit

### **Creed/affirmation**

And a final thought for you to take away and think about as we lead into our intercessions...

It's important to understand the reason for Jesus' anger in the temple – it wasn't a ruthless, unjustified outburst but a righteous reaction to what he witnessed. The religious rituals necessary for Jews to express worship to God had become a money spinner. Traders took advantage of the rule that only a temple coin could be used to purchase sacrificial animals, so they could extract commission on the exchange of coins. In addition it seems Jesus was particularly angry at the way the poor were being exploited. His words were directed to the sellers of Doves. Doves were a poor man's sacrificial offering. What's more the trading was taking place in the temple courts – the only part of the temple where the gentiles were allowed to enter, their worship was also being compromised.

Is this what angered Jesus? The fact that the poor were being exploited and the alien were being excluded from the presence of God. We know from Scripture that this is what causes sorrow in the heart of God. The cause of the poor and the outcast is what he is passionate about more than ritual sacrifice.

As we journey through Lent, you may be fasting in one way or another, a ritual act of worship. It's worth remembering that the discipline, the sacrifice itself is worthless if the heart is not right with God. The prophet Isaiah gives a stern warning to the people about fasting. The fast that God requires is to loose the chains of injustice and ...to set the oppressed free; to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for the wanderer; to clothe the naked and not turn away from those in need.

As we come out of this pandemic, many of us are going to be excited at the chance to gather again in our church buildings and to attend worship services.

But there's no denying that the nation has been through a trauma, for some it's had greater impact than for others. There's going to be long term knock on effects for many – economically and socially, as well as raised levels of anxiety, loneliness, mental health and issues of general well-being. Increased poverty, materially and mentally, will be on our doorstep.

If we claim to be followers of Jesus, if we want to offer a sacrifice of worship, then the cause of his heart will be our passion. We are going to have to consider how we can actively care for those in need and how we can reach out with the love and healing that God offers to all who turn to him.

So I leave you with that challenge to think about. But at the very least we can pray. So let's continue in prayer, interceding now for the poor of the world and of our neighbourhood.