## **John 2:13-22 The Cleansing of the Temple**

I wonder if you have ever visited a cathedral and been confronted with signs, scary people with badges or even a turnstile to get in. There are cathedrals that charge admission except for services of worship, I understand the financial pressures they are under, but it doesn’t look good. Over the years I have had conversations with people who have drawn the comparison with the traders in the Temple courtyards. Now before we get too self-righteous, it’s worth remembering that we can all put obstacles – physical or psychological – in people’s way when they come to our churches. What’s the real message here?

All the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – record this event. Only John puts it near the start (the Gospels aren’t always strictly chronological) and it seems to set the scene for the rest of his account of Jesus. It’s a kind of summary.

**Jesus Acts Like A Prophet**

Jesus enters the Temple and sees the trading going on in the outer courts. The trading would be for animals for the sacrifices offered in the Temple, as well as a sort of *bureau de change*, exchanging everyday money for Temple currency to buy what they needed. It makes you wonder who set the exchange rate.

Jesus drives them out, tipping over their tables, saying his Father’s House has become a market. The system might purport to be selling supplies for sacred activity, but the purpose had been lost. In that way, Jesus is entirely in the spirit of the prophets of the Old Testament:

Isaiah 1:11 & 1:17

*“I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats…. [1:17] learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow.”*

Or

Amos 5:22-24

*“22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

The people coming to make the offerings might be sincere, but the system was broken.

**Jesus Upholds The Outsider**

The Temple in Jerusalem was a place with a series of layers or filters. The Court of the Gentiles was the outer ‘layer’, then the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites (men in other words) and then the Court of the Priests before getting to the holiest centre of the sanctuary.

It appears that the trading was going on in the Court of the Gentiles, which means that an area intended for non-Jews to pray was occupied with the noise and the hustle and bustle of trading. And all of this appears to be permitted and even sanctioned by those in authority at the Temple at the time.

The prophet Isaiah had had a very different vision for the Temple:

Isaiah 56:6-7

*“And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.*

*Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”*

Did you notice something interesting there? The Temple is often understood by Christians as something exclusively for the Jews, but that was not the original vision. King Solomon’s dedication prayer as recorded in 2 Chronicles 6 talks about it being a place where people from other nations might come to pray, and Isaiah reinforces it here. Although the Temple had a unique place for Jews, the vision was that it could be a sign for everyone of God’s presence in his world. And we should also notice that the prophet states that offerings of foreigners will be accepted, even though we have seen the prophets were critical of the sacrifice system.

No wonder Jesus deals with it severely, because this vision has been lost. It shows his passion for including all people that he is so confrontational about this particular area. The account of this incident in Mark’s Gospel has Jesus quoting this precise prophecy from Isaiah and even describing it as a den of robbers. John just records it being called a market, but the principle is the same. This is a place intended for prayer, and prayer in this place is prevented by obstruction, noise and disruption. The Temple was supposed to be an inclusive place – at least to a degree – but this has made it an exclusive place, only of value to those who are permitted to go in further to make their offerings.

**Jesus Identifies Himself With The Temple**

I have been reading that in the original Greek language we get two different words for Temple in this passage. First of all when Jesus comes into the Temple – in other words the outer court – John uses the word that can mean the entire Temple complex (hieron). Further on when he says destroy this Temple and I will raise it in 3 days, he uses another word (naos) which is often used for sanctuary – the inner part which is where God is perceived as actually being present – or present in a special and focused way.

Jesus’ listeners are confused – they still understand him to be referring to the physical Temple, which has taken 46 years to reconstruct, and building continues until about 64ad, only to be destroyed by the Romans in 70ad. But John tips us off, because if we haven’t got the hint already, Jesus means his own body. He is the place where God is present in a unique and focused way – and at another Passover in a couple of years’ time, he will die and rise again on the third day. The offering he will make is the fulfilment of all that has been offered here in this building before.

So how can we go to that new Temple? Where is it?

Whenever we pray, whenever we meet together for worship, we are ‘in’ that Temple. St Paul often uses the phrase “in Christ” to refer to followers of Jesus, and that has a sense of being within something. And he develops the idea – that we are living stones for a spiritual house for God and Jesus is the cornerstone or keystone. As his followers, we create a totally different kind of dwelling place for God in our hearts.

So here, as John gets the story of Jesus’ life underway, we are given a preview. Jesus has come with a message that will challenge everything down to its foundations – even the sacred rituals of the Temple - as did the prophets of old. He seeks justice for all – those exploited by the Temple trading, and those excluded by it. And he comes pointing to something new that will fulfil ideas of a Temple housing God by pointing to his people being the place where he dwells.

In the end, it is not about whether you have a shop in a church, it is about the priority you place on opening up the possibility of knowing God to all.

**Eternal God, give us insight to discern your will for us, to give up what harms us, and to seek the perfection we are promised in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**