

Our Temple : John 2 vv 13-22

Let's face it, people don't always understand what we've said. Can you think of times when you thought something was really clear – that you had agreed what you were going to do – but, when it came to it, what happened wasn't what you were expecting? I find that's quite a common experience for me! It's often only with hindsight that we truly understand.

It was no different for Jesus and his disciples.

Now actually we've read the reading today from John's Gospel, because the Lectionary pointed us to that version of the story. This story is in all four gospels, and here in John he puts it right at the start of Jesus' ministry. It comes right after the wedding at Cana, and he's just called his disciples. People are starting to discover who he says he is. And he's at the start of his ministry. The other three gospels, which tell their story in a more historic order, put it at the end of his ministry. They put it in the stories when Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem at the end of his ministry. Of course Mark was writing for the early disciples, Matthew was writing for the Jewish people and Luke was writing for another audience in the Greek-speaking world. They wrote in an order that more matched the history of the events. John was writing quite a bit later, and not doing it as a history, but as a set of expressions about who Jesus was and the faith.

And actually in the first three gospels you don't have this piece about tearing down the temple and re-building it in three days. What you have instead, is that Jesus, at the start of his ministry, is already in conflict with the Jewish leaders. And they couldn't find a way to get at him. Only John puts this extra bit in about 'tear down the temple and in three days he will build it again.' And of course in hindsight the disciples understood it differently.

That day in the Temple when he cleared everyone and everything out would have been something they wouldn't forget. But what was it all about? How could he possibly talk about destroying and rebuilding the Temple in three days? It had taken nearly 50 years to build.

For the Jewish leaders this had so much history. When they came back from being slaves in Babylon, they had struggled to rebuild the old temple, because their economy had been ruined. They hadn't got the resources, or the materials or the men of the money to re-build it. And the book of Haggai tells how the workers threw down their tools because they did not have the resources to rebuild a temple as glorious as the one of old. So these Jewish leaders struggled to understand Jesus when he said he would tear down the temple and re-build it in three days.

It had been the same when Jesus had told them he would die: it just didn't make sense.

It was only after his death and resurrection that they put two and two together, and made the connections with other things he had said. Jesus wasn't talking about the building in Jerusalem: he was speaking about his own body.

Now I am not a Calvinist. The Calvinist Protestant tradition says that everything is foretold. Everything is set in history, and we all know that it's just going to happen. But I don't think most Christians don't think that way about our lives. I think that we have within our faith the notion of free will. And things will happen according to how people act, things they choose and the decisions they make. And so this story is very powerful. Jesus is setting out on a journey where he doesn't quite know where it is going to take him to. I don't think he knows if it's going to be two years or ten years, or however many years.

I think at the start of his ministry these poor disciples really didn't know where this was going to go. And I think Jesus didn't know either. I don't have a notion that Jesus was born and grew up knowing that he was going to suffer and be crucified. But I do think that when he was about 30, and started on this mission and ministry, standing up to the people who had made a mockery of their ancient faith, and was calling people to holiness and love, he did have a very clear view that this would only end in a challenge to the religious leaders of his time.

And we shouldn't delude ourselves. Everyone around knew that if you got into trouble with the authorities, you would come to a sticky end. Jesus' cross was not the only cross. There were hundreds of them around Israel and on the major roads in and out of the cities. They knew where dissent would lead. But even then, knowing that, Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem, and said he would speak his father's word. 'I will tell you what the love of God is calling you to be.' And I think that it was only after his death and resurrection that the disciples put two and two together, and made the connections with the other things he had said over the three years. And in this story Jesus was not talking about the building in Jerusalem; he was talking about his own body.

And although early Christians loved meeting in the Temple to pray, they also quickly realised that they didn't need a place to be close to their God because Jesus was now the 'place' where they could make that connection. And though I am here back in church, we have learned that we don't have to be here in church to worship our Lord.

It may be still hard to explain to other people. Paul found this. Jesus' death as a criminal seems really stupid until you understand the whole story.

It can be like that for us too. Do we understand it all? Have we made all the connections? Being a follower of Jesus means recognising that we are on a journey where we need to allow time and Godly wisdom, (not necessarily worldly wisdom) to guide us. We are not fully formed. We are not living in a determined world where everything is set how it will happen. We are growing into the knowledge of what it means to be a holy people and the requirements change over time. Even the disciples had to work it out over time, with the help of the Holy Spirit. If we recognise that we are not fully formed, that we are under construction, is when we begin to rely on our Lord, rather than ourselves.

And if you look back at the story of Jesus throwing out the traders from the temple, where was the recognition of the holiness of the God which Moses and the Israelites had experienced on the mountain? Where was the observation of Godly laws with their directives to put holy things first and not to steal? Where was any understanding of the holy things being something against the popular culture? All absent, as the various traditions and expectations around this most holy season of Passover were twisted into a market-place of profit and consumerism.

There is a warning here not to be sucked into the market economy of our society, but to be consumed instead with zeal for the dwelling place of our God. And that dwelling place is NOT this building. Not a building now - for Jesus has promised that the Spirit of God lives within US - so our zeal, our enthusiasm, is for hosting and revealing the presence of God in our very selves, in our congregations, in our communities, in our world. Not just in a building we might think of as a temple.

Have we torn down the temple and found Christ in ourselves? I hope so.

Have we found Christ in ourselves, such that we yearn to be back together, in this place, so that we can celebrate our faith in a risen Lord? I hope so.

Bless you all. Amen.

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