



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Lent

readings: [Exodus 20.1-17](#), [1 Corinthians 1.18-25](#), [John 2.13-22](#)

3 March 2024

Did the choice of Gospel reading take you by surprise? You might be asking 'why St John when this particular church year is devoted to St Mark's Gospel?' The answer to this is that St Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and on several Sundays, it is supplemented by St John as there is not enough material in Mark itself.

But there is another surprise! The overturning of the tables of the money changers in the Temple is usually associated with the last of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem, one of the events that leads to his crucifixion. Yet St John puts this explosive episode in the second chapter of his Gospel. St John tells the story of Jesus in a particular way. For the Evangelist Jesus' entry into his public ministry was high impact, controversial and prophetic. The whole of Jesus' ministry was to be interpreted in the light of what Jesus did in the Temple and its meaning.

Whether or not Jesus cleansed the Temple twice – once at the beginning of his ministry and then just before his crucifixion - I will leave you to think about. My own view is that there is no need to worry about the historic authenticity of Jesus' engagement with the Temple, that it could only happen once and that by placing it at the beginning of his Gospel John is helping us to explore its deepest meaning.

Jesus may well have been righteously angry, and his actions and words indicate his disapproval with the commercialisation of Temple worship and the greediness that had taken root. But there is more to say.

And that is said when the Temple officials confront Jesus and challenge his actions. 'Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up'. Uttered so early on in St John's Gospel this is what now gives the story and meaning of Jesus shape and coherence.

The Temple was the meeting place between heaven and earth, the place where God and human beings encountered each other, and in Jewish theology it was the place where all the nations of the world would come to pray. But this order of things is no longer effective because from now on there is a deeper encounter between God and humanity at work. It's found in Jesus who is now the place where God and human nature are joined as one. The new Temple is the risen body of Jesus, broken and transformed and it's in the wounded and risen body of Jesus that all humanity is drawn to worship God and to serve his purposes throughout the world.

As we read on in St John's Gospel this explains what we then read. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night because the atmosphere in Jerusalem would have been electric after Jesus' prophetic act and the city a place of fear. No wonder the Samaritan woman was initially in awe and afraid of Jesus as the news of what happened in Jerusalem had reached Samaria whose own identity as a place of worship was now threatened. Like the shock waves of an earthquake expanding outward

When Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: 'But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth', the message of St John is beginning to make sense. All are invited to receive the gift of the Spirit, to join the body of Christ, to share in the truth of Jesus and join in the offering of worship in the risen body of Jesus. The people of God have been re-cast as the new Temple, the body of the risen Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, living the truth of God in an unsatisfactory world. A place that is universal and accessible to all.

This is a deep transformation for the whole of humanity into which we are invited and only Jesus' death and resurrection makes it possible. This is the sign that shapes the telling of the good news of Jesus by St John.

Yet, as I reflect on the cleansing of the Temple, I am aware of some deeper challenges. In my mind's eye is a picture of members of the Jewish religion praying at the 'wailing wall' in Jerusalem, in front of the remains of Herod's Temple, lamenting its destruction, a sight I have seen a number of times. I can still hear the sound of the prayers; I can see the written prayers – white paper slotted into the cracks in the great wall. The destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of the Romans, some 40 years after the crucifixion, is memorialised in the Jewish faith every year.

Alongside this image I also have in my mind's eye a picture of the Archbishop of Canterbury standing with leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities after the 7th October attack on Israel, jointly expressing their feelings after the murder of Jewish victims. I see newspaper reports about the rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia as the tragedy of Gaza continues to unfold with so many innocent deaths and a desperate humanitarian crisis that must be resolved by an end to violence.

The body of Christ is no place for antisemitism and Islamophobia, or racism of any kind. These are sins that divide us from God and from our own selves and which dehumanise the other. The new Temple that Jesus speaks of is for the healing of the nations. It is a place where each person no matter of what race or nationality, background or ethnicity, level of faith commitment or gender or sexual orientation has a home. The death and resurrection of Jesus has meaning for every human being and creates dignity and respect and equal regard for all through creating deep relationships with each other. In the new Temple we encounter our humanity in a new and transforming way.

The risen body of Jesus is a wounded body. The pain, struggle and suffering of the crucifixion are visible in this new reality. But healed wounds are sources of outreach, love, and fairness. Wounds are transformed so that the cycle of revenge, the rush to bloodshed and the instinct for violence, is absorbed and turned to the purposes of justice and, to use one of St John's favourite words, truth. This is the task of the church in every place – a body that engages with injustice and hatred so that the shortcomings of this world can be turned to love and grace and offer transformation to all peoples and nations.

But notice something else. It's the contrast between the solidity of the Jerusalem Temple – a vast, solid invulnerable building that it was - and the fragility and vulnerability of body imagery. Something soft, organic, complex is given to us instead of a building that is immovable and solid. Bodies are fragile, prone to wounding, they bruise, they require healing, they hurt, they experience death.

And that is the point: that Jesus' Spirit at work in the body of Christ enters the suffering of this world and transforms our sinfulness through the pain. God does not take sin away from the world but offers hope and vision that the pain of this world does not have the last word but can be and will be transformed into a means of grace and love.

Being a Christian is not an easy option. It is not a withdrawal from the reality of this world. Our Lenten discipline is our way of entering the pain of the world. We enter Lent as fragile human bodies that are in solidarity with a world that is suffering. We take the risk of exposing ourselves to failure. We make ourselves vulnerable to change. And because we are in Christ and Christ is in us, we journey with the whole of the wounded and risen body of Christ, knowing that we are held through mutual support and are secure in the grace of God.

As we pray and read the scriptures, as we fast and consider how we steward our material possessions we enter the dynamic of death and resurrection. We don't earn our salvation but cooperate with God's grace at work in us. We reflect on what God desires for our lives and enter that process of aligning our own desires with his. And as we do so we anticipate our eventual death and rising to new life and in humility point this needy world to the overarching sign of St John's Gospel, the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Amen.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson,
Dean of Derby**