

Lent 3

Jesus charges through the Temple in a blazing rage, furiously driving out the legitimate businesses that are helping it to function and complaining that they have made 'his Father's House' a marketplace; in the other three gospels he proclaims, with scriptural quotation, that where it should be a 'house of prayer' they have made it a 'den of thieves'. Cue centuries of PCC meetings agonising about whether they can sell postcards in church. And missing the point at every level.

Did Jesus do this because the temple, the sign of God's presence with his people, had become a commercial enterprise? The disciples see it that way as all the gospel accounts, even today's, relate disparaging remarks about trading there; I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on this text that wasn't about trading in the temple (or the church). But the 'den of thieves' accusation isn't originally about that. In Mark, the earliest writer and our earliest source here, Jesus combines quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah:

'my house shall be called a house of prayer *for all the nations*, but you have made it a den of robbers.'

That is different: he expresses distaste for the way the business is being conducted, but his concern is access to the Temple for *all*, about inclusivity in the house of God.

Then consider the phrase 'house of prayer'. We aren't talking about a sanitised Anglican cathedral with vergers shushing people. You did not go *into* the temple unless you were a priest. You went *to* the temple, not *into* it. You said your prayers and offered your sacrifices outside, in a courtyard, which would have had the devotional atmosphere of a barbecue in an abattoir. If animals were to be sacrificed, as scripture required, they needed to be sold there: you couldn't bring the necessary livestock all the way from, say, Spain. You had to change your money first because your coins would carry the image of the Emperor, making them idolatrous. The commission, we're told, was about 2%, hardly exorbitant. These were legitimate business transactions in Jewish religion; Jesus may have been questioning sharp practice ('den of thieves') or the behaviour of those selling, but not the trade itself.

That this story is told in all four gospels is unusual in itself. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, this happens at the *end* of Jesus' ministry. But John, from whom we've just heard, tells this 'cleansing of the temple' much earlier. John doesn't attempt a linear history: he puts this story here because it further reveals who Jesus is. Similarly, we don't read the gospels from beginning to end on Sundays beginning at Advent and

finishing on Christ the King; we are given portions which connect, which illuminate our celebration. This incident is given to us on this third Sunday in Lent because it was a *sign*, a sign of the resurrection.

We hear it without context this morning, but we should recall that it follows directly on a passage we heard in January as part of the Epiphany cycle. John presents this as the next significant event after the wedding at Cana, with a minimal narrative link:

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

Then, straight on to what we've heard today:

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem....

As John sees it, this is the second sign. So this must also 'reveal his glory': it does that but the onlookers don't yet see it. At Cana Jesus told Mary that 'his hour had not yet come'. Now we are given a sign of that hour. As we've just heard, John concludes this episode

²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

So this gospel is a spoiler: John has moved us directly from the beginning of the story to the promise of its glorious conclusion.

Jesus' prophecy of his death and resurrection, equating the word 'temple' with his body, corresponds to the allusion to Zechariah ('zeal for your house will consume me') and the replacement of the temple sacrifice with Jesus' own suffering. It is one of many double meanings in Jesus' words as reported by John (e.g. 'born again / born from above'; living water) which are taken literally by the listeners (sometimes with comic effect) but are understood by those in the know.

Although John doesn't quote Jeremiah directly here as the other writers do, Jeremiah's prophetic witness is an undercurrent. Jeremiah condemned those who imagined that they could use religion as somewhere to hide from the living God. Jeremiah denounced the Temple: the institution itself, not merely its abuses. By this prophetic sign of violently, angrily clearing it, overturning even its legitimate businesses, Jesus does the same. John then provides his spoiler in the verses about the 'temple of his body': Jesus' action is a sign that the temple is done for, but also that **he** is done for in his present incarnate human life. But, unlike a pile of Herodian bricks, the temple of his body will be 'raised up' on the third day. That's why we hear this story now, in Lent, on the way to the cross. We are given it as part of our own preparation for Holy Week and Easter. It is an excellent example of how looking for the big picture (eternal life),

rather than trying to justify legalism (no trading on church premises) is always the best way to read scripture.

In the end that big picture is constructed by acknowledging the truth about Jesus. The Cana story concludes

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This one ends

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

And we gather here to glimpse that glory and affirm our trust in the Word of God, the true Temple, Jesus, the Christ, who comes to us here in bread and wine.