

Matthew 21.12-17

Jesus and the Temple

Palm Sunday 2018

Matthew 21.12-17

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

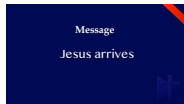
“And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. “He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

“And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. “But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, “and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

“‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies

you have prepared praise’?”

“And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.



Intro

In the Jewish world of Jesus there were 10 levels of holiness. The whole world was recognized as being holy at level 1. Level 2 holiness was found in the land of Israel. Level 3 holiness was to be experienced in Jerusalem. Level 4 on the Temple Mount. Holiness then increased through the courtyards of: The Gentiles, The Women, The Men of Israel, The Priests and the Temple Building itself until Level 10 was ascribed to the Holy of Holies, a shrine in which God was believed to be.

This inner sanctuary was so holy that only once a year would a priest would go in there to make sacrificial offering for the sins of the people. His encounter with God in the holiest place on the holiest day of the year could have disabled or killed him so he would go in with a rope tied around his waist in case something happened and he had to be pulled out.

This bit of background highlights several features of Religion that Jesus set out to destroy.

- 1) Like many religions from around the world, Judaism observed distinctions between what was deemed holy and unholy, or in other words, sacred and profane or holy and mundane. This seems to be a primal idea that people orientate to and slips into people's thinking very easily in some way. Jesus did not support this.
- 2) In keeping with this, religions mark out some spaces as being sacred or especially holy. Once a space is marked out as holy it is given a unique function. People go there on pilgrimage to touch the holy and fulfill their duties.
 - a. The Temple in Jerusalem was believed to be the place where God dwelled on earth. That Level 10 holy space in the Holies of holies beyond all the courtyards and hidden off from all but one priest a year on the Day of Atonement was the place where God's presence was deemed to reside at the heart of his people. That presence made the Jerusalem Temple holy as the umbilical cord between heaven and earth.
 - b. The function given to the Temple was as the place where sins could be forgiven in the manner allowed for. With the temple came priests and a system of atoning for sins with sacrificial animals such as sheep, goats or doves.

In his ministry of announcing and launching the Kingdom of God on earth as we read it Jesus did not seem to place any value on all this. He did not respect grades of holiness. He did not respect sacred places or sacred buildings over secular or regular space on God's earth. He seemed to see the whole of life as holy everywhere. He was not providing people with techniques or methods to moves from one mode of holiness to another.

He spoke about his own body as being the sanctuary of God and about how springs of living water would flow from inside people who came and drank from him.¹ His teachings called people to him saying that he, Jesus of Nazareth, was the place where divine grace and humanity met. He served the purpose people gave the Temple as the place of reconciliation between God and people. Jesus was presenting himself as the Temple replacement and teaching that God reigned in every human heart that opened to him. Jesus acted as if the divine presence was fully with him and not contained in a hidden chamber as the heart of the Temple.

He even went so far as to personally declare forgiveness of sins to people.² What did that say to the whole system of temple and priestly ministry with sacrifices that people had accepted? If a dusty Rabbi can convincingly declare God's forgiveness to people, all that investment in the Temple is redundant.

As his provincial ministry progressed there was a lot of concern and offense taken at all this because Jesus was devaluing and disrespecting the whole temple orientated system at the heart of the Jewish nation. He was thumbing his nose at the religious establishment who lived for and benefited from all this. He was campaigning against the temple and the religion it operated.

We may think that his extending forgiveness to a few people was wonderful loving gesture to them. Yes it was, but it was also a strong attack on the Temple and the way forgiveness was ministered there.

To give a sense of the scale of the Temple's importance; beyond its spiritual significance it was also a significant economic, political and cultural focus for Judaism and Jerusalem in particular. It was a huge operation that in modern terms merged a stock exchange with an abattoir and a theatre with all the surrounding support businesses that would entail. Holiness and forgiveness were big business for the Temple and Jerusalem.

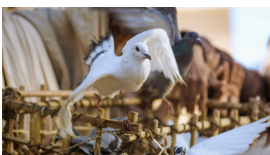
Crisis

This tension between Jesus and the way things are had been brewing for three years and then came the day when Jesus enters Jerusalem, and takes his message to the Temple itself. This begins his last period of ministry in Jerusalem before the backlash plays out and he takes up the cross he had been expecting and preparing for.

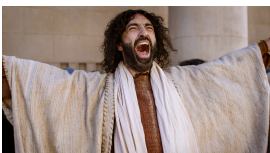
We heard it today in just two verses:



¹² And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers



and the seats of those who sold pigeons.



¹³ He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

This was a direct assault on the temple system and all that it did to obscure the Kingdom of God he was representing. As happened elsewhere, Jesus briefly quoted something from the Jewish

¹ Re. Forgiveness see John 2.21 & Living water - John 4.11 , John 7.38

² Matthew 9.2 & Luke 7.36-50

scriptures. As allusions these references would bring up a fuller message already grounded in the scriptures.

Listen to this prophecy from Jeremiah chapter 7:

⁷ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD. ³ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’

⁵ “For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

⁸ “Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.

Already 600 years earlier the Lord God of Israel had spoken through Jeremiah and other prophets as he was now speaking through his anointed Son, “I don’t like religion. I want holiness of righteousness and purity in worship.”

Jesus echoed Jeremiah’s description of a den of thieves.

There was apparently some sharp dealing among the money-changers in the Temple. Their role was to exchange the blasphemous and unacceptable Roman currency for kosher Jewish Shekels as People could only buy sacrificial animals in temple currency and, as with all banking operations, there were stiff exchange rates exploiting people. But the issue was not just sharp practice on the trade floor.

A den of robbers is not where the robbery takes place but where thieves return to with what they have stolen. It’s their hideout. The indictment was that this was where people with a guilty conscience went to hide out rather than change how they lived. Rather than repent and transform as living sacrifices, the system allowed people to simply add some religion to their lives and keep it all their sin balanced with a little religion. This is typical religious conduct and it stinks! Religious systems make it all too easy for self-centered people to find comfort in familiar rituals without entering into a change of heart or committing to a life of love. Jesus challenged that head on.

He was also indignant that this was happening in a place reserved for the Gentiles. It was the first courtyard on the Temple mount at about Level 5 holiness where provision was made for the nations to come to Zion and pray to the one true God. Instead of respecting this, the Court of the Gentiles had been commercialized and taken over by bankers and animal traders in support of the religious system.

Ultimately Jesus’ intention was to replace the Temple. He was the new temple. He in himself was God’s new provision for what people had tried to achieve in the Temple which had become a den of thieves.

John records Jesus as saying so enigmatically in this way from 2.18:

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”

His resurrected self would be the new temple, the place of reconciliation between God and the world in one who had taken upon himself the sin of the world as the God provided sacrificial lamb and had triumphed over all that the world, the flesh and the devil could throw at him on his cross.

It was this statement that was thrown back at him in his trial before the Jewish authorities. Jesus had indeed spoken against the Temple and the whole religious system and said he would replace it.³

At the level of humanity concerned about power and economics this is one big reason why he was crucified. In earthly terms it would be a bit like someone saying they wanted to destroy Europort in Rotterdam or Schiphol Airport to become in them selves the link between the Netherlands and the rest of the world! It would be seen as both crazy and dangerous. Jesus was speaking about linking God and Israel as the source of loving grace and forgiveness.

Do you see why they had to crucify him?

Conclusion:



What I want to make clear by this Palm Sunday reflection is that Jesus was about dismantling religion and replacing it in himself. He was actually taking apart the paradigm of thinking that under girded Judaism of his day but many other religions as well.

There are no holy places where God dwells more than in the human heart.

Distinctions of holiness are not valid. In fact they are in part the insidious justification for distinctions of race and gender as if being male is more holy than being female.

According to Jesus:

- God is not interested in a better religion with pilgrimages to special places and special services on special days.
- God is not interested in special buildings that are deemed important by religious institutions.
- God is not interested in special classes of people managing the flow of his grace among people. He wants all people to minister his grace among themselves.
- As we heard last week, God is not interested in having the knowledge of him channeled through the patriarchs alone but wants it known by everyone and freely circulating.

This characterizes Jesus right through his teaching and acting ministry. He is making both clear statements and subversive actions against religion day after day. But the day he entered the Temple in Jerusalem he got very hands-on and attacked religion and all connected with it head on in his Father's name.

The man who said he was now the source of God's grace, the light of the world, The bread of life, the soul quenching water of life, the one who would send the Spirit of God as well as being the way the truth and the life had come to town and religion would now have to fight back.

³ See Mark 14.58 & Matthew 26.61