



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 3 March 2024

Lent 3

The Rector will preach at both Charges:-

As our Lenten journey leads us towards the cross, we give thanks for God's continuous concern for creation. Through worship and Communion may we draw closer to each other, standing as equals before bread and wine, symbols of God's enduring and universal love.

*"His disciples remembered that it was written,
'Zeal for your house will consume me.'"*

John 2:17

An illustration to set the scene

Classical paintings of *Christ cleansing the Temple* usually depict architecture from the artists' own time, with the action taking place inside a building not dissimilar to a Christian basilica.

Such pictures might evoke images of Jesus in our own time fervently destroying the shelving in the cathedral gift shop, which hardly reflects the reality of the second Temple, rebuilt by Herod.

This was constructed on a site measuring over fourteen hectares, guarded by walls into which were set gates leading to a number of courts, each being the designated space accessible by a specific group of people – Gentiles, women, Jewish men, then priests.

At the centre stood the building in which resided the ***Holy of Holies***.

It was in the outer, open-air court of the Gentiles that trading took place for the animals necessary for ritual sacrifice and where Roman currency was exchanged for coins deemed acceptable for the payment of a Temple tax.

Jesus' actions in overturning the money changers' tables took place far from the hallowed centre of the Temple complex, yet the religious leaders must have felt that his threat to their authority was dangerous enough to be a turning point in their relationship with him.

Today's Gospel teaching

The synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark & Luke - portray this moment as **so incendiary** that the authorities swiftly act to eliminate Jesus.

This explains its positioning at the start of Holy Week, immediately after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when his popularity is at its peak.

For St John this chronology is unimportant: it is Jesus and no one else who decides his fate; he is the one who acts to ***lay down his own life*** and ***take it up again***.

Jesus' ministry in John's gospel is *framed by three Passovers*: beginning here in chapter 2, *immediately preceded by the generous outpouring of fine wine at a marriage feast*.

The second occurs at the feeding of the five thousand, while his ministry ends with crucifixion on the day of preparation before Passover.

Jesus' final act before death is to drink sour wine. This pattern of **wine, bread and wine again** hints at the liturgical form of Passover, which, combined with Jesus' declarations that he is the **true vine** and **the bread of life**, turns the Gospel into an extended reflection on both this **central Jewish rite** and its **Christian successor, the Last Supper**.

By driving out the animals gathered to be sold for ritual sacrifice, **Jesus issues a direct challenge to the legitimacy of this form of worship**.

He is the Passover lamb, who goes willingly to his fate.

No other blood sacrifices are necessary.

It is only after his resurrection that the disciples understand: **Jesus**, not the Temple complex, **is the locus of God's redemptive power**.

By striking at this system of Temple sacrifice that has over the centuries assumed a totemic status, Jesus challenges his audience to recognise that the rites and the building, originally created to praise God and to enter into God's presence, **have become in themselves objects of adoration** – *stumbling blocks rather than cornerstones*.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Devotion to buildings along with certain forms of worship is not confined to first-century Judaism.

It has also been prevalent in both the ancient and the contemporary Church.

When desire to preserve buildings or liturgies constitutes the overriding motivation, it becomes harder for congregations or individuals to meet with God.

Sometimes changes in patterns of worship, or reordering of buildings to make them fit for a contemporary purpose, are interpreted as desecration.

When the necessity to proclaim the Gospel afresh to each generation loses out to an agenda of maintenance, faith becomes reduced to a heritage preservation society.

Devotion to God may be enhanced by special places, rites or customs, but we continually need to guard ourselves from allowing these to become the focus for our piety.

The heart of faith doesn't lie in buildings or institutions – they aren't necessarily where we find the presence of God.

Jesus reminds us that his body, not temple or church, is the true home of worship.

A living, breathing body is vulnerable, but also dynamic, the very attributes the Church is called to model for it to be truly and effectively the Body of Christ.

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