



# *Third Sunday in Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*



Sunday 3 March 2024

### READINGS

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

## *Cleansing of the Temple*

The Gospel passage for the Third Sunday in Lent - is often referred to as the "Cleansing of the Temple. John locates the cleaning of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry at the Passover, whereas the story in Matthew, Mark and Luke - it comes during Holy Week, at the end of Jesus' ministry. The important issue is NOT when this particular story is located in Jesus' ministry. It is NOT important whether this event occurred at the beginning of his ministry or occurred during the last week of his ministry.

The important issue is this: What is the meaning of this event? What is the message that God is communicating to us through this story on this third Sunday in Lent? John wants us to know that this was at the time of the Passover, the great feast when the Jews "remember" the exodus. How God delivered them from slavery through Moses. People would come to Jerusalem from everywhere. Now especially at Passover, every male was required by Law to come to Jerusalem to observe the Passover Feast.

Jesus had been staying with his family in Capernaum. He then went on to Jerusalem, like everybody else, to celebrate the great Festival of Passover. He went up to the temple. When Jesus arrived there, he caused a great disturbance. When Jesus went into the temple - the very first courtyard that you would enter - was the Gentile courtyard. This was the outermost courtyard of the temple. And Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel came to this outer courtyard of the temple but could not go any further. And when Jesus entered in this outer courtyard, he found two groups of people. He found those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and he saw moneychangers sitting.

At the Passover festival there would have been as many as two and a quarter million people. People would come from everywhere. They would have all kinds of different currencies. But the temple only accepted one kind of currency. So, in order to pay the temple tax - and offer animal sacrifices - , the people had to exchange their currency for the kind that would be accepted by the temple authorities. And these moneychangers were necessary. It seems that these were legitimate businesses. Why, then, did Jesus drive the merchants and moneychangers from the Temple premises? Some commentators believe that Jesus was attacking the extortionist practices of many of those who sold animals and exchanged money. Others believe that Jesus was outraged because this trafficking took place in the court of the Gentiles, thus hindering them from approaching God in worship.

We could spend a lot of time debating what made Jesus so upset that he would turn over the tables in the temple. All we really need to do is to look at the words that Jesus uses, according to John. "Take these

things out of here! Stop making my father's house a marketplace". He doesn't tell them to stop selling but he tells them to stop selling in the temple. Now what Jesus might have liked to have found when he came to the temple was an atmosphere of quiet dignity and respect. Perhaps he would have enjoyed hearing the murmur of prayers being lifted up. Perhaps he would have rejoiced to find men and women with a sense of brokenness and contrition over sins. But instead, all he could hear was the bellowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the cooing of doves and the shouting of the auctioneers. He could barely hear himself think in the midst of all this noisy commerce.

John tells us that he made a whip of cords and drove them all out of the Temple. you can feel the anger of Jesus in this scene, unlike almost any other scene from the gospels. We can visualize Jesus pouring out the coins from the money bags of the moneychangers. We can also see him overturning their tables. In an earlier verse, we heard of Jesus knocking over the chairs of those who sold pigeons. Jesus was remembering the words of the Prophet Isaiah who said, speaking God's words, "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:7).

This is the issue: The temple is to be a house of prayer. That is what our Christian temples are to be: houses of prayer. The temple is a house of prayer not for "our own people" but for all people of all nations. Jesus was thinking of God as his Father and that his Father's house had been violated. Similarly, when our own homes have been broken into, robbed, vandalized and violated, we naturally become angry at those thieves who have ransacked our houses. We feel personally violated. Similarly, Jesus thought of the temple as his Father's house and it was being vandalized and violated, and destroyed by people who did not respect or revere it - as he did. Now all of this should teach us that the house of God is not a place for merchandise, but rather it is a place of worship. It is not a place for worldly distractions, but rather a place to focus on spiritual things. It is a place where we come to meet with one another and to meet with God. And so, we cultivate an atmosphere that puts all worldly distractions outside our gates and allows us to come with dignity and respect to the very throne of God.

When asked to justify his violent actions with a sign, Jesus refused; instead of any interpretation, justification or explanation, he responded with a puzzling saying: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." But everybody knew it had taken 46 years to build the temple. It couldn't be done in three days. What was he talking about? Jesus was referring to his death and resurrection after three days. By saying that his body was a temple, the place where God dwelt, he is saying that worship is a spiritual matter of heart, soul, and mind. It isn't a matter of offering animals. What Jesus wants is the offering of ourselves.

The temple of Solomon and the temple of Herod were only archetypal temples. They were not the real place where God is worshipped. They were temporary places until Christ came. The true temple where God is worshipped is Jesus Christ. Anyone who wants to worship God must come to Jesus Christ. Israel came to the archetypal temple in Jerusalem because God temporarily resided there. But when Jesus came into the world, God permanently resided in Jesus. The body of Jesus was the house in which God lived. And whoever would worship God must come to the true Temple of God.

The temple in Jerusalem no longer exists. When the Holy Spirit came to dwell among God's people, each one of us became a temple. Our own personal temples are to be houses of prayer—built by God so that we might serve and worship our Creator.

We are the temples and wherever we are, there is God. Amen