

## Sermon 4 March 2018

### John 2:13-22

People had gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, which was the greatest of all the Jewish feasts. Every adult male Jew who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was bound to attend. But it was not only the Jews who lived in Palestine who came to attend. It was a pilgrimage made by Jews living all over the world. It was the dream and aim of every Jew, no matter where they lived, to celebrate at least one Passover in Jerusalem. Incredibly, as many as two and a quarter million Jews often assembled in the Holy City to keep the Passover.

There was a tax that every Jew over the age of nineteen had to pay. That was the Temple tax. This tax was one half-shekel, the equivalent of almost two days wages. Pilgrims arriving from all over the world brought with them a wide variety of currency, but only shekels were accepted at the Temple. And so we have money-changers, who charged through the nose to convert the different currencies into shekels.

What enraged Jesus was that pilgrims to the Passover who could ill-afford it, were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money-changers, and this was being done in the name of religion.

On top of that there were the sellers of oxen, sheep and doves, which were needed to make sacrifices. Again, these sellers took advantage of the situation and charged through the nose. All in all, it had become a commercial enterprise of very doubtful values (excuse the pun). And all this carried out in God's house. So it is no wonder Jesus was moved to extreme anger, and so he created mayhem, tipping over tables, scattering money and animals everywhere.

There are various aspects to this story and I won't go into all of them, but I will highlight a couple. The first is something I have mentioned before. One of the most interesting things about this story is that here we have Jesus single-handedly playing havoc with the livelihood of the money-changers and the sellers, and yet not one person lifted a finger to stop him; not one person intervened. Now on the one hand, they probably realised they were very much in the wrong and so stood back feeling rather guilty.

But on the other hand, it does say something about the aura of Jesus. We grow up with this Sunday School image of a very meek and mild Jesus, but the reality was so very different. Jesus was a person of authority and of power. Yes, he undoubtedly radiated a warmth and a love which drew people to him, but at the same time he was a person of extremely strong character. Look how he took on the religious leaders whose word was the law; look how he straightened out the Temple, the hub and centre of Jewish worship. This man had mana, this man gave out an air of dominance.

The other point is this, once again we see Jesus sweeping away the rules and regulations, those things which he considers to be getting in the way of our access to God. This was a common theme in his ongoing battle with the Pharisees. Continually, he told them that they had it all wrong. Their preoccupation with ritual and regulations meant that they lost their focus on what God was really all about – the simple undertaking of caring for one another.

I think we need to ask ourselves, 'What gets in the way of our relationship with God? What obstacles are there in our lives that prevent God from working with us? Is it time? Are we too busy to pray, to read, to give time to those in need? Is it our negative attitude to others? Is it our sin – doing those things we know are wrong? Or equally, omitting to do those things we should be doing?

This leads me on to the last point I want to make. We are all very human and as such we make mistakes and we have our faults. It is important that we acknowledge this, and Lent is a good time to focus on this. But the good news is that firstly, God really does forgive us, and secondly, as long as we are up for it, God is very willing to use us, despite our failings. And in fact, it is invariably those of us who have our full share of failings that God does use.

On Thursday evening at our Lent group discussion, we looked at the incident where Jesus calls to Zaccheus, the tax collector and tells him that he is coming to his house for dinner. People are aghast.

Tax collectors were rather notorious for ripping people off and here was Jesus calling upon his hospitality. Zaccheus was so impressed by Jesus that he promised to give away a very large proportion of his wealth. So here was Jesus using someone with failings ( Jesus alluded to him as lost) and showing how, despite that, he could actually change and make a significant contribution. Let me tell you a story.

*A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk, from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the water bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house.*

*The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, but the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and was miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it was meant to do.*

*One day by the stream it spoke to the water bearer. 'I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologise to you.' 'Why? What are you ashamed of?' asked the water bearer. 'I have been able for these past two years to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work and you don't get full value from your efforts,' the pot said.*

*The water bearer felt sorry for the cracked pot, and he said, 'As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.'*

*Indeed, as they went up the hill, the cracked pot noticed the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path and this cheered it up somewhat. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half of its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer.*

*The bearer said to the pot, 'Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house.'*

Each of us has our own unique flaws; we're all cracked pots, but if we allow it, the Lord will use our flaws to grace his Father's table. In God's economy, nothing goes to waste.

Rev Warner Wilder