

## Sermon 3 March 2024 Cleansing of the Temple

### 1 John 1:5-10 John 2:13-22

People had gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, which was the greatest of all the Jewish festivals. The gathering place for everyone was naturally the Temple. Associated with the Temple was a tax, which every Jew over the age of nineteen had to pay. This tax was one half-shekel, the equivalent of almost two days pay. 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 exorbitantly 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 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 was being 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 would like to highlight a couple. Firstly, 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 no-one lifted a finger to stop him; it appears that 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. On the other hand, it does say something about the aura of Jesus. Forget the Sunday School image of a meek and mild Jesus. Jesus was a person of authority and power. Yes, he undoubtedly radiated a warmth and 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 law. And here we have him creating absolute mayhem in what was the hub of Jewish worship, arguably the focal point of their culture. This man had mana; this man gave out an air of dominance.

The other point is this – once again we see Jesus sweeping aside rules and regulations, those things which he considered 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. *'How terrible it will be for you experts in religious law! For you crush people beneath impossible religious demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden.'* Luke 11:46. 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 know are right, that we should be doing? In other words, sins of omission rather than commission.

The psalmist says, *'Create in me a clean heart, O God.....do not banish me from your presence.'* Psalm 51:10,11.

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 naturally a good time to focus on this. But the good news is that firstly, God does forgive us, and secondly, as long as we are up for it, God is very willing to use us. And in fact, it is invariably those of us who have our share of failings that God does use.

I am reminded of the story of Zaccheus, the tax collector. Jesus tells him that he is coming to his house for dinner. People are aghast. Tax collectors were somewhat 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 portion of his wealth. *'Zaccheus stood there and said to the Lord, "I will give half of my wealth to the poor, and if I have overcharged people, I will give them back four times as much."* Jesus responded, *"Salvation has come to this house today, and I have come to seek and save those like him who are lost."* Luke 19:8-10.

What a story of hope for us all. Here was Jesus using someone with failings and showing how, despite that, he could change and make a significant contribution. Jesus alluded to him as lost, and I am sure we could all put our hands up and acknowledge that there are times when we have lost our way. 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 shoulders. 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 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'm ashamed of myself and I want to apologise to you. I have been able to deliver only half of my load because this crack in my side causes the water to leak out all the way back to the master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work and you don't get full value for your efforts.'

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 and so again it apologised to the water-bearer.

The water-bearer said to the pot, 'Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path? 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 still use us, flaws and all, to grace his Father's table. I have said it before and I will say it again, we don't have to be a Mother Teresa or a Francis of Assisi to be of service to God. We can each of us, in our limited and humble way, be his disciples.