

1 Corinthians 1:18-25**John 2:13-22**

Imagine the scene. We are in the Houses of Parliament. It is the day of the Queen's speech – the opening of parliament. Everyone is preparing: the ceremonial robes have been aired and brought out, the mace has been polished. The Queen's Crown and Throne are bright and newly cleaned. The members are gathering in the houses of Commons and Lords and the guests are waiting in the gallery.

Suddenly a young man walks in accompanied by a few friends. He sweeps aside all the robes and trappings of ceremony. Tears up the speech written for the Queen and turns on the astonished onlookers. "This whole place is a disgrace!" he shouts. "It's corrupt from top to bottom! you ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

Before he can get away Black Rod arrives. "What right have you got to behave like this?" he asks

"You can arrest me if you Like". replies the young man. "You can throw me out. But one day I 'll put an end to corruption like this. Your system is finished!" Then before they can stop him, he leaves.

I am not being political here and my illustration is not a comment on the probity of parliament or otherwise. I am simply trying to find a modern parallel which helps us to get some grasp of how shocking Jesus' actions were. Any such stories are only partly parallel to the astonishing scene in the Temple. No illustration can do justice to what Jesus did; we have to understand the event itself, unique as it was, and to understand as well what John wants us to see within it. This truly was one of those moments when heaven opened and angels came to and fro.

The temple was the beating heart of Judaism. It wasn't just as it were, a church on a street corner. It was the centre of worship and music, of politics and society, of national celebrations and mourning. It was also the place where you would find more animals (alive and dead) than anywhere else

But towering above all these it was, of course the place where Israel's God YHWH (Yahweh) had promised to live in the midst of his people. It was the focal point of the nation, and of the national way of life

This was where the then unknown prophet from Galilee came in and turned everything upside down. People used to this Bible story can forget just how shocking it must have been – which is why it's helpful to try to find modern illustration of similar, though hardly identical scenes. And the question it raises are: What was wrong with the Temple? Why did Jesus do what he did?

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It was the time of the Passover when the people celebrated God delivering them from slavery and the beginning of the journey to the Promised Land. Every Jewish male who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was obliged to attend the feast. The aim of every Jew is to spend at least one Passover in Jerusalem. It is thought there could be anything from a quarter of a million to two million Jews attending the Temple over the eight days of the festival.

Every Jew over the age of 19, including Jesus, would have to pay the Temple Tax, so that the services and the sacrifices could continue. Each had to pay half a shekel, which was about two day's pay. This had to be paid in Temple shekels or Jewish shekels; other currencies were seen as unclean. As pilgrims came from all over the known world, in the Temple courts there were money changers. In theory that is simply a good idea and there could be no objection. However, the exchange rate was extortionate. For the exchange to the shekel people were being charged a whole day's wage – a 50% profit.

People had to bring doves and other small animals for the ritual sacrifices which cost about a day's wage, however they had to be unblemished, perfect. The custom was to examine them animals and pronounce them unclean. The people then had to buy doves from inside the temple which were sold for about 20 times as much.

In the name of religion people were being cheated; this was extortion. It seemed no-one spoke out against this injustice. It made Jesus really angry that the church was being used like a robbers' den.

He was incandescent with rage.

He made a whip. He drove the sheep and oxen out of the Temple, overthrew the tables - and poured the money out.

There are times when it is right and necessary to be angry. Jesus was angry against the evil being done in the name of the church. What upset him so much was that the people entrusted with enabling people to worship and meet with God had twisted the opportunity for their own gain. Instead of furthering the faith and worship of the people the Temple authorities were ripping them off. This was unforgiveable in God's eyes and Jesus reacted accordingly.

In the Old Testament we read of God's anger against the religious leaders who led the people away from God and who betrayed their trust. In Jeremiah we read:

Jeremiah 23 :1-4

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Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

And again verse 11

*Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
even in my house I have found their wickedness,
says the LORD.*

*¹² Therefore their way shall be to them
like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven and fall;
for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment,
says the LORD.*

When we read the Gospels and hear accounts of Jesus' encounters with the religious authorities and his confrontation of their corruption and wrong attitudes it is easy to simply stand back and condemn them. But I have to say that these stories make me nervous. When Jesus confronts the errors of the religious establishment he is confronting people like me, a church leader, and like you the 'religious people' of the day. Now don't get me wrong I am not saying that we are corrupt but what I am saying is that as God's people we must keep a close watch on who we are and how we behave.

We need to ask ourselves; do the practices and expectations of our churches and how we live our faith together, put barriers in the way of people coming to God? Do we heap extra burdens on people that are not required by God and that prevent them from coming to know him and his love for them?

Back in the early 2000s there was a lot of talk about being a missionary church and how we made ourselves accessible to people. There was talk about the fact that often we expected people who came to church to behave, then they would belong and they could then believe in God. I think that there is a certain amount of truth in that we can tend to sit in our church buildings and expect people to come to us and become like us

in their attitudes and behaviour. But that is not right, it isn't what Jesus did. He went out amongst the people. He met people where they were and then when they found a faith in him he asked them to behave.

One of the things that this last year has done for me is to make me think hard about what it means to be Church. When we haven't been able to worship together physically it has raised the question of what it means to be the church for our community. We have had to find different ways of doing things and have found that people who don't come to church have attended our online worship. Could that be because certain barriers have been removed that have made it easier for them to access worship.

It is certainly different worshipping at home, with a dog at our feet or a cat on our laps, a cup of tea in our hands – or round the kitchen table together. One person has said that her teenage children who aren't enthusiastic about coming to church are happy to drift in and out of the kitchen where the service is on a laptop and then discuss the talk over dinner. I find that exciting and challenging. As we come out of lock down we need to be asking ourselves how we go forwards as Christian communities. Do we need to examine how we do things and ask what barriers we are outing in the way of people in today's society and culture to meeting with God?

And equally, though we may not be indulging in corrupt practices, we have allowed ourselves to become absorbed into a consumer society that survives on injustice and oppression. We have in many of our attitudes lost our Christian distinctiveness and lived in the way our society does and accepted it as normal

There is no real sense in today's culture of having to save for what we want, of earning the things that we buy. Many people want everything now and expect it as their right

We are using up the world's resources.

There is only so much wealth, food, minerals, oil and other things and they are meant to be for the whole world. Up until now the situation has been that 30% of the population has been using up 60% of the resources. However people in China and India have discovered consumerism. They too want the computers, the fridges and hi-fi's that they have been making so cheaply for us to use.

In the west we are simply not used to paying what things cost. We get our clothes made incredibly cheaply in India and the Far East, we get the hi-tech products, that have become essential to our comfort. made at incredibly small cost, we get our food as cheap as possible. This is all

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done because we pay people in other countries tiny wages that none of us would consider working for. The supermarkets squeeze the farmers and use their power to get things incredibly cheaply. We want it all. We want it now and we want it cheap. The economic effects of the pandemic have been devastating; financially many people are struggling badly. We are looking at very high unemployment and a higher rate of child poverty in our country than for many years. We are paying the cost of this virus and it means we will have to alter our expectations and our priorities.

The inequality and injustice that exists in our world is wrong. It is as upsetting to God as the trading in the Temple was. The traders in the Temple had their priorities wrong. The same thing has happened to our society. Our focus has been on getting the best for ourselves, which isn't necessarily wrong. But when we do that at the expense of others and the expense of the world God created then it offends him. Jesus told his followers, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."

This period of Lent is a good time for us to review what our priorities are, to consider how our faith affects the way we live and to reflect on any changes we might want to make in order to allow our faith in God to show in all our acting and thinking. It is also a good time to reflect on how we do that together as the church in these villages