

Talk Part 1

Jesus walking on the water is one of those well-known stories that really needs to be included in any summary of the life and ministry of Jesus. But whilst it is included in three of the gospels – Luke doesn't choose to include it – it is only the version that comes from Matthew that has the second part of it. For Mark and John the important thing is that Jesus came to the disciples when they needed him, and helped them get the boat to safety.

But Matthew also focuses on Peter – good old Peter – doing what Peter does best – acting before thinking! Or perhaps that's being unfair to Peter. Peter looked at Jesus and thought, "you can walk on the water so why can't I?" and initially at least he managed it. Initially at least he kept his eyes upon Jesus, he walked towards him in a way that should not have been humanly possible, but then got distracted by the wind and the waves, and it all started to go wrong.

There are many times when Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible. When we realise, or at least get an inkling, that Jesus is calling us to do something, and we really haven't got a clue how to do it, our immediate reaction can easily be, "How can we even begin to do that task?" or "Yes I'd like to give up that sin, but I have tried, and I can't" or even, "How can we introduce an organised prayer time into our lives when we are so busy, so disorganised, and even so forgetful"?

And if like Peter we start to look at those waves, those things that stop us focussing on Jesus, then achieving what Jesus is calling us to do will be hard.

And I'm not going to stand before you this morning and say, "And this is how you do it – I have worked it out!" – because I haven't. But what I can say is that this is the challenge we face, and God did promise that when he called us to do something, he would also equip us to do that thing.

So remember Jesus walking on the water coming to his disciples when they needed him. Remember Peter trying to follow Jesus' example. And ask Jesus to help you as he helped Peter – over and over again.

Talk Part 2

The story of Jesus cleansing the temple is one of those few stories that appears in each of the 4 gospels – but there is something very interesting about it which we at least need to mention as we start looking at it. In John's gospel it appears pretty much at the beginning – we have just had the first miracle which we looked at a few weeks ago, whereas in the other three gospels it happens towards the end. So when did it happen – or indeed, did it happen twice? Happening twice I think is unlikely, but possible, but rather than that I see this story as something that John in his gospel wanted to emphasise as being really important so he chose to include it early on. Again I remind you that the gospels are not history books – they are books written to convince readers that Jesus really was the Messiah, the Son of God, and so different authors are bound to do that in different ways.

But the fact that John saw it as so important says to us, that we really need to understand what is going on here. So let's try and do that this morning, and once we have done that, we can see how Jesus cleansing the temple applies to us today.

We are at the feast of the Passover. A quick aside – this is one of three Passovers that John mentions which is how we know that Jesus' ministry lasted for 3 years. The Passover was the time when Jewish people were called to make a pilgrimage to the home of Judaism – to Jerusalem.

At this time the Jewish people were scattered far and wide and all are called to make the pilgrimage – so huge numbers of people are involved, some have estimated that there could easily have been 2 million people in Jerusalem at the time. And Jesus went too.

We are then told, “In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.” Of those 2 million people, very many would have been people who had converted to Judaism – but because they were not, by ancestry, Jews, they were still considered to be Gentiles. Now the temple in Jerusalem was made up of a number of courts. The most holy of those courts was in the middle, and it was the court of priests – only priests were allowed in. Then there was the court of Men – this was where the Israelite men were allowed. Then you had the court of the Israelites, which is how far Israelite women were allowed to enter, and the final court was the court of the gentiles. This last court was where everyone was allowed to go, and so it was therefore in this court that Jesus found what he found.

And why was Jesus so cross? Well a number of reasons really. Remember that many of these pilgrims had travelled a great distance to be there. When they arrived, first of all, they had to pay a temple tax – and they had to pay that half-shekel, which was about 2 days wages for a working man – in the local currency. So the first thing these pilgrims had to do was to go to the money changers and change their own money into the local currency, and the money changers in the temple charged a fee for that transaction which added between 15% and 20% to that temple tax. So that was Jesus’ first objection.

Then these pilgrims were required to offer an animal sacrifice. Now if you have just been travelling for up to several weeks to come to Jerusalem, you would be unlikely to bring an animal with you to sacrifice, so your next stop off in the Court of the Gentiles was to buy a suitable animal to sacrifice – needless to say – at an exorbitant price. And actually if you had brought your own animal with you to the festival, the odds were that the priests would reject it as not being pure enough, and so you would have to buy one anyway. So that was the second reason Jesus objected.

But both of these are not Jesus’ main reason for being so cross. The reason for coming to Jerusalem for the Passover was to come to pray. And if you were a Gentile the area of the temple where you were allowed to pray had been converted into a market place – so what chance did anyone have of praying with all this, frankly dodgy, trading going on.

And then, on seeing all this, Jesus, shall we say, got a bit cross. He didn’t just shout, we are told he made a whip of cords to drive these so-called traders out of the temple. That’s not just a quick reaction. It is a concerted plan to clear the place. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market place.” Ooh! That’s going to be red rag to the bull time for the Jewish Authorities isn’t it – “My Father’s House”?

But, to be fair to them, they simply replied to Jesus, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Now, if Jesus wanted to make a quick point, why didn’t he just find a sick person and heal them? Surely that would have proved his point wouldn’t it.

But no, Jesus answered them by saying, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” And then we get this retort that the temple had been under construction for 46 years (and by the way wouldn’t be finished for another 20 years), and so they questioned his 3 days rebuilding? And that appears to be the end of the conversation – although John does go on to say that Jesus was referring to his body and his death and resurrection. But still, why didn’t Jesus perform a miracle?

Well, and this is why, where when in Jesus' ministry this actually happened, becomes important – and why it almost certainly actually happened towards the end of his ministry not at the beginning despite where John has chosen to include it. By that time, the Jewish Authorities had already witnessed Jesus performing many miracles – healing sick people, making lame people walk, overcoming demons, the list goes on – and they still didn't accept who Jesus actually was and Jesus knew this. They asked again for a sign, but they were never going to accept any meaning from a sign. If someone wants to explain something away, then explain it away they will. If you have a heart to find out about something, then find out you will, but if you have no such desire, you won't bother, and it is very unlikely that someone will convince you of otherwise. So for Jesus to simply acquiesce to the Jewish Authorities' demand would have been totally pointless.

When we looked at Jesus walking on the water earlier, I mentioned how God promised to equip us for whatever he called us to do.

I wonder whether those pilgrims, on arriving at the temple to pay their temple tax, to make their sacrifices, and to pray in the temple, in the courtyard of the Gentiles which had been turned into a marketplace, I wonder whether they felt equipped to do what God was calling them to do? God wants people to pray to him – but I don't know about you, I cannot imagine being able to pray in the temple in Jerusalem surrounded by all this wheeling and dealing.

The temple, as originally built by Solomon – the temple we are talking about here is the first re-building of that temple after Solomon's temple was wrecked by the Babylonians – was meant to be a place for God to live in. Now I have to be careful how I put this in this age of equality, but next Sunday we will be celebrating Mothers, and I hope that part of that celebration will be the homes that Mothers, I'm sure working totally and equally alongside their partners, create for their children. And those two creations – the temple and our homes – focussed me on our church buildings, and what we think they are for, how we treat them, and how they should be regarded.

Clearly our views on church buildings have moved on since Solomon's time – I don't think anyone today would see a church building as being a place that God would come and inhabit in the way the early Jews did, but neither would any of us, I hope, see our church buildings as anything other than really special places, which are there to significantly enhance our ability to worship God. But is that how we actually treat those buildings?

[Thriplow]

Here in Thriplow we are fortunate that our building is in good order. One of my recently retired colleagues always referred to the toilets here as the best in the diocese – that's not quite the words he used, but it's what he meant. We are constantly looking at maintaining the building in an orderly fashion, and have probably the most loved churchyard for miles around. But I can't help but wonder, does it fulfil its purpose?

[Shepreth]

Here in Shepreth so many people, particular those who are occasional visitors, comment on what a beautiful church this is. Of our 4 churches it is probably the warmest in the depths of winter – although it is a church so that is probably faint praise. And we do have significant issues to face, not least surrounding our lighting, or lack of. But I look around and ask myself, even if the lights were sorted, would it be fulfilling its purpose?

But I'm not just picking on this church building – there are, mainly village, churches up and down the country which, if they are not actually falling down, they need significant work doing on them to make them fit for purpose. 'Fit for purpose'. What is that purpose? That purpose is, as I have already said, to help people in their worshipping of God, but actually it could and should be able to be used for so much more. Why do we treat our churches so differently to our homes for example? Our homes are so important to us and so should our Christian homes be.

Our homes are where our families grow. Our Christian homes – our church buildings – could so easily be where our Christian families grow. And I don't mean just on Sunday morning. If within each of our churches we could establish a warm, comfortable, welcoming area where people could meet to socialise, to learn together, to pray together, then those buildings, which so often feel like a mill stone around our necks, could once again become the basis of growth within our village churches.

"But that would cost a fortune." "Nice idea but its never going to happen." "You'll never get permission." I wonder if those people who were building Solomon's temple, or Herod's re-building of it, took that attitude, would the temple of Jerusalem ever have become one of the great wonders of the world that it was? Would those two million or so people who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year, would they have bothered?

We are called to build the church in our villages – and no, that is not just the church building, but it is the church family, the people of God who come together to worship God, to learn about God, who pray to God, and a family needs a home so that we welcome people to our family, to our home. And we need to do that because, whether the people of our villages know it or not yet, the best future for each and every one of us is to be part of that family. And that family is the church. The single best way anyone can grow as a Christian is by being part of a Christian community, a Christian family, a church! Church Matters. But we must be prepared to dream first – and then work out how to make our dreams happen.

Jesus complained about how the temple was being used. I rather think that, for very different reasons, he would also complain about how our modern day temples, our church buildings, are being used, or not being used. I suggest that it is time to put that right.

Amen