

Sermon for Sunday 3 March 2024 – The Third Sunday of Lent

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Exodus 20.1-17; Psalm 19.7-14; 1 Corinthians 1.18-25; John 2.13-22

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Please do be seated.

There is the old story told of someone taking the children's talk, maybe in Sunday School, maybe in Church, and they describe something, and they want the children to say what they're describing. And they describe something that is grey, or maybe red, furry, with a long bushy tail, that eats nuts. A little boy puts his hand up and says, please, I know because we're in Church and Sunday School, the answer is Jesus, but it doesn't half sound like a squirrel to me.

I think sometimes when we come to scripture, we can actually focus more on the squirrel than on Jesus. We can jump to application for ourselves and miss what the gospel, particularly the gospel writers, are saying about what Jesus was doing, what God was doing. So with that in mind, I want to turn to our gospel passage this morning. You will notice the sharp-eyed and eared amongst you that Pete read a little bit further than you had in your pew sheets. The reason for that, hopefully, will become obvious in a moment.

But our reading starts with, and the Passover of the Jews was near; this word 'kai', 'and'; it links the wedding at Cana of Galilee, which John in his gospel has recounted just before, with this event; maybe John is paralleling Jesus, putting aside the Jewish rites of purification, using the jars that were for the purification water to introduce something new. Maybe there's something about that. But these are in some way linked. We get a lot more information about Jesus cleansing the temple from John's gospel - Mark, Matthew and Luke just basically say, he turned up at the temple, he wasn't too happy, he drove people out, and he says, don't make my father's house a den of thieves and robbers, and we can often then import that into what we read in John's gospel.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus cleansing the temple towards the end of his ministry, just before the trial and crucifixion. John has it at the beginning, and people say, well, one of them must have got it wrong. I wonder whether it's simply that Matthew, Mark and Luke only have Jesus going to Jerusalem once at the end of his ministry, so that's the only place that they can talk about the cleansing of the temple. But John has Jesus going a number of times, and throughout John's gospel, we have this thread of conflict with the temple leaders, with the religious leaders.

So with that scene setting, you may want to have your pewsheets just handy in front of you and turn to the gospel, because as we delve into this and try and draw out what it might be saying to us this morning about what God is doing here, in this account that John gives us, we maybe need to look at some of the beautiful literary structure. Don't worry, this isn't an English, a Hebrew or a Greek lesson, I promise you. But it has a structure.

It's known as chiasmatic, or symmetrical, in this reading. And it's why I asked Pete to just read on for one verse. I don't know about you, but my hands are a little bit cold, so join me in giving your hands a rub. The rector is looking very worried at what his curate is doing. Now, take one of those nicely warmed hands and put it up. Turn around and wave to your brothers and sisters in Christ, say 'Good morning'. Now, keeping your hands up... this is fun, isn't it... Choir, are you doing it? Yes. Good. Okay, starting with your thumb. I find it easier with the thumb. Go ABCBA [*pointing to thumb and each finger in turn*]. ABCBA, yeah, got it. If you don't like doing this sort of thing, then maybe we go for screens and I can put this up on the screen, but there we go.

The structure of this passage is symmetrical. It has an idea; it has a second idea - AB. It has a third idea, which is the central idea; it mirrors the second idea, the B, and then it mirrors the first idea, A. Does that make sense? No. ABCBA. You want to look at my notes afterwards if you see things better visually.

But this passage starts with the Passover of the Jews was near, and it ends with the Passover. Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, and many believed in his name because they saw the signs he was doing. Then we have this idea of the disciples remembering, and then we come back to them remembering again. And in the middle, we have a discussion about the temple. And in this linguistic, or this literary, technique, the most important thing is the middle one. So the most important thing in this passage is the discussion of the temple.

Also in this passage we have double meaning, which we'll come on to in a minute, which leads to misunderstanding between Jesus and the temple authorities. But we find Jesus in the temple. To begin with, it's talking about the temple complex; this is a busy time. It's Passover, people have come from miles around and it's busy. And Jesus comes in and he sees what's going on and he's not happy. Now, unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, notice that Jesus drives out the animals. He doesn't drive out the people. He does say to the people who are looking after the doves to get them out of here, but of course, he can't drive the doves out because they're in cages. So somebody needs to take the cages out.

And he tells them, stop making my father's house a marketplace. This is a beautiful play on words - the Greek says, 'the house of my father', or, stop making the house of my father a house of commerce or a house of trade. The word is 'emporium', where we get the word 'emporium'. And Jesus here identifies the temple, the place of God, where you encounter God as being his father's. Whoa, that's a bold statement, isn't it?

John doesn't have the baptism of Jesus - we have John the Baptist recounting that at the baptism of Jesus, Jesus was declared to be the son of God. And here is Jesus, the first time we encounter him in Jerusalem, in the temple, saying, this is my father's house. No wonder he's challenged by the religious leaders; how dare he?

And then we see throughout John's Gospel, as Jesus comes backwards and forwards into Jerusalem, that when he's in Jerusalem, he has conflict with the authorities. And they come to him... the disciples,

remember, afterwards, zeal for your house will consume me, we'll come back to that in a moment. But then the Jewish leaders, here, the second reference to the Jews, the Jewish leaders, those who ran the temple, come to him and say, what sign? What authority are you deciding what does and doesn't happen in the temple?

It's like maybe us gathered, and this building full and busy for a big festival, Easter, Christmas, and somebody coming in and saying, well, you might be running this, but actually I should be running this and challenging the authority of Simon and of the churchwardens. Maybe it wouldn't go down too well, would it?

And then we have this beautiful discussion of misunderstanding. Destroy this temple; that's the sign; it's a delayed sign, it's speaking of the crucifixion. But here, Jesus isn't talking about the wider temple complex, he's talking about the holy of holies, the holy place, the place where God dwells, the place of encountering the divine, which in Jewish thought was the holy of holies in the physical temple. And Jesus begins to reorientate this to himself.

And there is confusion because he is talking about 'temple'. And much as we have later in John's Gospel, with, in the next chapter, Nicodemus, where Jesus says, you must be born of spirit, you must be born again. And he goes, how can I be born again? And there's misunderstanding. The Samaritan woman at the well, about living water; give me this water; and there is misunderstanding. And the disciples, when Jesus says that Lazarus is asleep, and they misunderstand Jesus because he's saying that Lazarus is dead; here the temple authorities misunderstand and think he's talking about the physical temple, the bricks and mortar, and he's not. He's talking about his body that would be destroyed on the cross.

And then he says about raising it up. The only time in John's Gospel where this word for 'raise up' is used of sort of bricks and mortar is here by the Jewish leaders. Every other reference, in fact, in the New Testament using the same word is the resurrection of Jesus.

The idea of Passover, remembering the temple, remembering in the Passover. The temple is what this passage is about. This new temple of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. That later, Paul would say, as the body of Christ, you, you all, the community of believers, are the temple. That place of divine encounter.

I said we'd come back to remembering., There are two counts of the disciples remembering. They remember that it was written in scripture. It's in Psalm 69 - 'that zeal for your house will consume me', again this has double meaning, speaking of being consumed, being destroyed, that yes, there was a passion for his father's house. But that passion for his father's house would lead to his death. It would consume him, it would destroy him. And then after the resurrection, the disciples remembered that Jesus had said his body would be destroyed, but it would be raised again. And then this closes off with the Passover.

It would be very easy to jump and say, well, Jesus was concerned about the temple, about propriety in worship, that there wasn't money changing going on and commerce where there should have been prayer. And yes, that's true. Maybe as we go through lens, we reflect where we allow things other than our focus on prayer and worship to happen corporately as the people of God, as the temple, and individually.

But in doing so, can I encourage us to think of how Jesus in this encounter begins to reorientate the place of encountering the living God around himself, with everything that that means, that we encounter God in the person of the risen Christ. Amen.