

Sermon Trinity 16 Sunday September 27th

Matt 21: 23 'Jesus entered the temple courts and while he was teaching the chief priests and elders of the people came to him. By 'what authority are you doing these things'.

The exchange between Jesus and the chief priest and elders which is recorded in our Gospel reading this morning follows the incident known as the *Cleansing of the Temple* which was clearly important in the early church because it is not only recorded by Matthew, but also by Luke and Mark. It occurs in St. John's Gospel, though in contrast to the other Gospels, is placed early in Christ's ministry rather than in the build up to his arrest, trial and eventual execution. In John 2: 16 we read of Jesus saying: 'How dare you turn my father's house into a market?' It is the *Cleansing of the Temple* to which our text this morning is referring. When the Gospel writer records the words 'by what authority are you doing these things' it is making reference in particular to the cleansing and also to Christ's religious teaching and his healing of the sick, because up until the chief priests and elders has assumed that these were their tasks. Clearly Christ's teaching regarding the temple was important to both the early church and the first readers of the Gospel accounts. In this short sermon I want to draw out its meaning.

An estimated two million people converged on Jerusalem every year for the annual Passover festival. In order to pay the required temple tax, people had to convert their Roman and Greek coins into religiously acceptable currency that bore no image. For the required sacrifices, most people purchased unblemished animals from the temple markets - doves, sheep and cattle: a range of animals for a range of budgets. Most could only afford the cheapest option, a dove, which if bought in the temple cost ten times more than it did in the streets of Jerusalem. Hence the corruption of the merchants and money changers against whom Jesus railed

Buying items for the Temple sacrifice was an expensive business for the mostly impoverished faithful, who had already sacrificed financially merely to travel from all corners of the empire. This exploitation on its own would explain Christ's anger, but is this really what the cleansing of the Temple is all about? Well no, because something is rotten at the core and it is the system itself, because the meaning of God in people's lives had been reduced to satisfying a sacrificial bureaucracy. The God who proclaimed to the Hebrew people at Sinai that 'I am the Lord your God', who brought his people out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of slavery, the God who spoke the words of freedom and love – a God of steadfastness, long-suffering and mercy - is distorted and reduced to a sacrificial cult involving corrupt transactions.

When Jesus talks about the Temple in the New Testament, people thought he is talking about bricks and mortar, but he is actually referring to his very being. In John 2: 19 and 20 we have an exchange between Jesus and the Jewish leadership.

'The Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple Jesus had spoken of was his body'. Later in St. John's account when Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being born again, this learned rabbi can only understand this in terms of physical birth and completely misses the point. Again when Jesus speaks about the bread of life, people fail to see that he means the Word of God.

The Jewish world of the first century is blind to substance and obsessed with the top show religion and it is into the corrupt and hostile Jerusalem temple that God sends his son, into the very heart - the nerve centre if you like - of First Century Judaism, to begin a process of renewal and transformation, to create, in the commotion and table turning, a true bread of life and hope for a broken people and a broken world. To expose and rid the world of what is rotten and false. And even after the cleansing, as our Gospel reading makes clear, the Chief Priests and elders still did not understand. Jesus has cut open the religious system and it is rotten.

When religion is about control and narrowing God, we must be on our guard. When appearance trumps substance we need to be careful. When empty ritual does not reveal the glory of God we need to be on our watch. When we become obsessed with doing things because we have always done them this way, this is a warning sign. What we have to do in each age, time and context is to innovate so as to make the Gospel new and alive, whilst at the same time preserving the best of the old. This is what clergy have been trying to do over the past few years and especially in these difficult times since March.

Someone from another parish once said to me, 'I do not attend church when it is not a traditional communion service because I do not like the noise and bustle'. Whereas one St Bridget's member told me, 'I attend All Age worship service even though I do not like it, because my convenience is less important than supporting young families attending church'. Which of the two is the authentic Christian response?

Are we willing to let Jesus into our Church? Are we willing to lose control and encounter the God that has been made known to us in Jesus the God who blesses community over accomplishments, substance over surface top-show, risk over safety and self-giving over self-preservation? These are the urgent questions that the Gospel presents to us both in our parish and as individual Christians.

It is my hope as we celebrate this sacrament of Christ's body and blood this morning that all of us will continue to proclaim the good and challenging news that God cannot be boxed in or controlled by any desire for security; and that God's love - expressed through the guidance of the Holy Spirit - will cleanse those aspects of our worship and work of outreach which are for our own comfort and not for the glory of God.

We pray that we will always seek through prayer, the guidance of Holy Spirit and love for one another the best ways to be 'church' to all the people of West Kirby and Caldy.

Amen

David Chester