

4th March 2018 - Third Sunday of Lent

Revd Patrick Senior

(John 2:13-22)

It's not often I have a three point sermon but today it came about. After all the snow and wind of this week, it was good to sit down and prepare this sermon, and to think about the passage of scripture - so three points - Letter C – the context, the content, and the challenge

The context, we are familiar with this story as part Palm Sunday. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and is acknowledged as king and then enters the Temple. that is how Matthew Mark and Luke all record the events. In fact Matthew Mark and Luke all have Jesus' ministry culminating in arriving in Jerusalem it all builds into a crescendo of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Whereas John has Jesus visiting Jerusalem three times. Three times he goes up to the Temple, the third time being Palm Sunday and Holy Week. But John the Gospel writer does something different – as you can see, it's from Chapter 2. In fact it follows the story of Water into Wine – which we had a few weeks ago in Epiphany.

So John has the Water into Wine miracle – the creation of new wine after the old has run out, and then the Temple cleaning episode – It makes us wonder what is John trying to say to us?

- The old is tired and empty,
- The new sweeps it all it all away.

Putting these two episodes together makes us think, what is Jesus' ministry about what is the point of it?

I wonder how many of us were brought up with 'Jesus meek and mild'? Well as we explore the *content*, we can perhaps be unsettled by an angry Jesus turning over tables, of a violent Jesus who makes a whip to move animals, a shouting Jesus chasing people out of the Temple. Not so meek and mild now - and this at the start of his ministry.

Why is Jesus so angry? The space used as a marketplace in the temple wasn't designed for trade. The trade of animals and coins should take place outside the temple but then it wouldn't have had any benefit to the temple profits. So the temple authorities had brought the marketplace into a courtyard of the Temple that was reserved for worship by non-Jews - Gentiles.

The Temple was designed as three courtyards, one inside the next. So if you want to consider our church, the car park bounded by a wall was the outer-courtyard, reserved for washing by non-Jews, Godfearers who weren't circumcised believers. The church was for those of the Jewish faith, the sanctuary for the priests only.

The priests had control of the temple. The market should have been outside the temple, but they had brought it into the court and displaced the non-Jewish worshippers.

Perhaps now we can understand Jesus' anger the non-Jews/Gentiles couldn't worship. The market had become profiteering for the priests. The priests hadn't defended the Temple space for worship. It was all corrupt and unworthy for God.

It gives us an insight into Jesus's anger and his desire to honour God.

So that's the *action*, now we have the *reaction* by the priests who demand to know on what authority he does this- (of course it was their authority which is totally devalued and allowed it in the first place)

Jesus talks about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. The priests are unimpressed - it's taken 46 years to build - impossible. John helpfully reminds us that it is Jesus's body as the temple he is referring to. At the time for the priests and the disciples it must have been rather an odd thing to say. Later the penny dropped for the disciples after Easter. By the way - little flashback - three days is also mentioned at the start of water into wine miracle. John hints through his gospel that the *third* day is important.

For people of Jesus's day religion was transactional - we offer sacrifice to God. God accepts it and we know we have done what is required. The Temple market is part of that transaction.

But, Jesus sweeps it all away - physically with a whip of courts and spiritually with his final payment on the cross.

Jesus brought about a new way of relationship. We can no longer offer anything for the sacrifice as Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice. We can no longer make any payment for the old way is swept away. We cannot be good enough/or do enough to be counted worthy, or selfless enough. Jesus has changed the old religion of sacrifice for a new religion/relationship of grace. The grace that we are accepted, forgiven, loved when we recognise that Jesus has paid the price. Jesus has cleared the way. Jesus has acted selflessly to die for us and open the way to God-a new relationship that doesn't need a physical stone temple but rather our bodies become the temple. God lives in us.

So we considered the *context* and explored the *content*, now the *challenge*.

The challenge of the reading today for the people at the time of Jesus - it must have been startling that one man could confront the priests in this way. For the priests, as we know through all the gospels, Jesus confronts them again and again about what true religion is. And the Pharisees question Jesus again and again. So at the start of John's Gospel, we have the realisation that with Jesus, the old is passed away, a new way is appearing.

This challenge of a new dawn through Jesus, a new way of relationship with God which only Jesus makes possible. This is the heart of the gospel that Jesus brings about. No longer sacrifices and rules, no longer transactions but forgiveness and love - relationships instead.

Jesus is the go-between - our earthly lives and our heavenly Father. No longer needing a temple or animal sacrifice we meet God in bread and wine-freely given and received.

The final challenge from this reading is to remind ourselves that the building, the church, whilst valued and beautiful, isn't the place where God resides and lives. But rather God lives in us who receive him. God lives in you and me who honour his name. God lives in us who make him a priority. And he does this by grace freely given. It is us who by our holy

lives make this place holy. It is us by our prayer lives who create the holy here. It is us by our worship that we encounter God. God in us in the bread and wine.

Jesus came to turn water into wine after the old way was exhausted.

Jesus came to move the place of worship from a Temple in Jerusalem to our hearts through his sacrificial death on the cross.

So this Lent, as we consider the *context*, the *content*, and the *challenge*, how are we clearing out the clutter of our lives to make a space for a Holy God to live in us today? What are we doing, not in the name of religion but relationship, to draw close to God this Lent.

The challenge of Lent is ours, to grow, to respond, to desire something more of God. The old way to God is religion. The new way to God is relationship. Amen.