

*lenten sign posts*  
a sermon preached on the  
*third sunday in lent*  
4 March 2018  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by father john stewart*

the lections: Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25; John 2: 13-22

We began our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday when we were marked with an ash cross on our foreheads. It is intended to remind us that we are made from the same matter as the earth and at the end of our physical life we return to that state.

We Australians can add another layer of meaning to the ash because for us it is a most potent fertilizer. In Australia we know very well that after a bush fire the new growth emerges from the ashes left by the fire. So when we receive the sign of the ash we are actually opening ourselves to the new life which will emerge from it. Then we can understand that the idea of “giving up something for Lent” is really about looking for whatever might prevent our growing – growing deeper into the mystery of God and growing more intentionally here at St John’s into the community God is calling us to become.

Then each Sunday of Lent offers sign posts to help us grow.

The first Sunday had Jesus arrive at the Jordan River for the first time in public. He enters the river and experiences the Jewish ritual washing. (Not Christian Baptism as we understand it.) As he comes out of the water God speaks to him “You are my son, you are the one I love. I delight in you” (Mark 1.11). Jesus begins his journey and his public ministry by going into the desert to make a retreat. He has been washed clean, he has heard God’s loving voice and now he must figure out what his message and work will be. Like us he gives himself to the new growth emerging and he also identifies the things that will be obstacles along the way – the things he has to give up.

Last Sunday another sign post. Jesus shares with the disciples his sense that there is trouble ahead. He predicts his suffering and death and then being raised – new life once again emerging from the stuff of death. They won’t have a bar of it. That’s not what will happen to the Messiah – the one we have been waiting for for centuries, they protest. Jesus describes the way ahead – it’s going to involve focusing on God’s thoughts not their own; it’s going to involve walking and acting in such a way that everything makes a difference (“pick up your cross and follow me”) (Mark 8.31-37).

Now today a third sign post. Jesus is enraged because the Jews completely misunderstood the meaning of worship and have turned the Temple, God’s dwelling place, into a market (John 2. 13-22).

It’s interesting to ponder why St John has moved this story from later in the life of Jesus where it belongs to this place in chapter 2, directly after the miracle of the water being turned into wine at Cana of Galilee. I suspect this is John establishing very early in his Gospel what he considers to be the essence of the story. The “water” of the religion of the Jews is being replaced by the “new wine” of the religion of Jesus.

"Take these things out of here", Jesus says in the Temple. To the Jews he is referring to the corrupt money changing and the trading of sacrificial animals – all being done with an eye to ripping off the unsuspecting, and abusing the system. His anger is appropriate and measured. When challenged about his authority to speak like this, he introduces the central theme of moving to new life by way of dying, just as he had last week to the disciples. These people have to die to their old religious practices because God is doing a new thing. The temple being constructed out of stones and timber and precious

things is going to be replaced by a temple constructed out of living beings: Jesus is the temple and each of us is now a stone in it. All that blocks that has to be overturned.

And Jesus's anger is expressed not only about those people back then. It echoes today across our world. What would he have in mind now when he says "take these things out of here: stop making my Father's world a marketplace/ or a battleground". He would be referring to all the means we use to destroy one another, even when we think our cause is right. The Jewish leaders in the temple believed their cause was right too. He calls us, in this global village, as he called the people of his day, to commit ourselves to the way of nonviolence, forgiveness, new life by way of dying – and love. The unconditional love God offers us – nothing less.

And it gets much harder when we hear Jesus's anger directed also at our own hearts. We the temple of the body of Christ are being called today to be cleansed. What great goodness from yesterday do you need to cleanse so that it does not hold you back from today and tomorrow? What is there that must be overturned, that misses the point and takes us off on a tangent? We are capable of the same violence as those we criticize. We must have the temple of our own lives cleansed and put to rights. It is tempting to want to go back or look back. We must be aware of such regression and choose to move forward. God is calling us to gradual transformation into being the fulness of the image of God in which each of us is already made.

Pray that we will allow Christ to overturn our market – to grow beyond the small temple of our God that we cling to – our building, our traditions, our personal agendas. The potent fertilizer of the ash – now washed off our foreheads – is nevertheless still doing its work in us. Bringing forth shoots of new life and growth and revealing what needs to die in us.

This is our journey this Lent.