

a high calling
a sermon preached on the
third sunday in lent
4 March 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by father ken hewlett

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

I wonder what really made this Prince of Peace so cranky? What was the real reason for this display of anger? Was there more to it than just a bit of jam selling in the sanctuary of God? John records the charge as that of turning the Father's house into a market place. In our church life experience we may have noticed from time to time a minority of church people getting steamed up about developments on church property and/or about alterations to church buildings. In some places the interior of church buildings are altered, pews are moved or even removed to allow for a greater flexibility for concerts, for hospitality, installing bookstalls and souvenir cabinets, and even allowing sales on Sundays. Charges of sacrilege in God's house have sometimes been made. Was the opposition of Jesus along the same lines? Almost certainly not! In principle there was nothing to rule out the conducting of business in the Temple courts. Indeed it could serve a useful purpose.

Many pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the Festival would have travelled from distant towns and villages. It would be most inconvenient, not to say almost impossible to bring animals with them from their home villages all the way up to Jerusalem. Even carrying pigeons would be a nuisance. To buy what they needed for the sacrifice, in the courts of the temple, would have been very convenient. But the merchants had probably through greed turned this captured market into a racket, as can happen in any age and culture. Simply they were ripping off the pilgrims. This aspect is not immediately apparent from John's account of the cleansing of the temple. But as the other three gospel writers agree on another occasion in describing the actions of Jesus, they record his condemnation of the merchants as robbers. To sell at a reasonable price is legitimate; to rip off customers is clearly theft.

In what way were the money changes guilty of robbing the pilgrims? The pilgrims would come to Jerusalem with the ordinary currency of the country. It bore the image of the head of the Roman Emperor. This currency was unacceptable in the Temple. To put it in the offering dish was an insult to the God of Israel. So it had to be exchanged for temple currency. The moneychangers fixed the rate of exchange and had ample scope for exploitation.

In this matter I think we can rightly conclude that the anger of Jesus was directed at dishonesty, injustice, the exploitation of worshippers, many of whom were poor. Maybe Jesus had been ripped off himself. If so I can certainly identify with his anger. I imagine any of us who have been ripped off like this would be able to identify with his anger. Years ago on my way to a course I did in Israel, I landed in the UK at Heathrow. I had to transfer to Gatwick airport for the plane to Tel Aviv and I needed a little money to cover my costs so I decided to change at Heathrow \$50 Australian. As I was a captured customer I received the worst exchange rate possible plus a levy of £5 for the actual exchange leaving me with a little less than £13 for my \$50!! My thoughts teamed with dishonesty, injustice, exploitation!

At the time of this incident at the Temple, all of this nastiness is going on in God's sanctuary. In the covenant made with his chosen race God had deigned to dwell in an earthly sanctuary, and to receive the worship of his people based on ritual sacrifice. At first the sanctuary was in the tent during the period of the wilderness wanderings. Then it was in the Temple, built by Solomon. In Jesus' time it was in another Temple started in Herod's time. This economy was all to be changed in a new covenant based on the once and for all perfect sacrifice of God's incarnate son. The need for a material temple in Jerusalem and all associated ritual sacrifices would be ended. But for the present, and certainly up to the end of the last week in the life of Jesus, the status quo still continued.

Two millennia later we may applaud the action of Jesus in the Temple courts, and do so with a feeling of comfortable self-righteousness. But caution and self-examination are called for. What is the basic sin of the merchants? It was using what belonged in God's service for their own selfish gains. Sacrificial animals were needed, money had to be changed, for the worship of God. The provisions of these facilities were being prostituted for selfish gain. Whenever God's people use what belongs to God's service for their own ends they share the same sin as those in the Temple courts.

Anyone ministering in the church – preaching, holding office, leading groups – may succumb to egocentric motivation. Every Christian needs to ask frequently: why am I doing what I am doing in the church? What is my motivation? Do I secretly desire to enhance my reputation, to get acclaim, or to achieve a state of 'feel-good'? Undoubtedly there can be some sense of satisfaction, or fulfilment, in serving God, but any expectation of such feelings must be subordinated to a concern for God's glory and blessing of God's people. Otherwise there can be a desecration of God's sanctuary. Frequent self-analysis before God is necessary, for self-deception is a constant snare in the Christian pilgrimage. Every worshipper ought to ask: 'Why do I go to church?' To enjoy the hymns, or a favourite liturgy, to be with friends, or to feel better when I come away, are all benefits, but the chief motivation – the supreme reason for my coming to church – must be the glory of God, to hear God's Word and to respond to God presence.

Not surprisingly the Temple authorities were furious at Jesus' action. 'What authority have you to do this. Now show us a sign that you have the right!' As was his practice when unbelievers wanted a sign, his reply was enigmatic. 'Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will build it again'. His words were misunderstood and later misquoted against him when he was on trial. He did not say 'I will destroy this temple'. The building where they were had taken forty-six years to complete. It would after that be destroyed, as he foretold more than once, and its destruction would be related to the nation's rejection of his mission.

The significance of Jesus reply was I think not understood by the authorities, nor by his disciples till after his resurrection. From the focus on a material building, he directed attention to his own body, truly in the incarnation the sanctuary of the living God. In him God was present among humanity in a very special way. In the new covenant those baptised into his death and resurrection would themselves become the Body of Christ, and the sanctuary of God on earth. The Jewish authorities could not grasp this truth. The world today struggles to grasp it. It is therefore essential that Christ's disciples now, like those who saw the truth after the resurrection, recognise that they are God's sanctuary and live with the honesty, integrity, truth, justice and love required by our high calling. God depends on us for God's presence to be known and responded to in our time. May we be faithful in this high calling.