

VPBC Sermon The Jesus we never knew x25.

## **John 2:13-22 18 June 2017. Cleansing the Temple, A sign of the times**

A week or so ago we looked at John's final seventh sign pointing to who Jesus really was, the raising of Lazarus. Today we are winding the clock back a bit and looking at the pointer to the pointer which is the cleansing of the temple and where John has chosen to place it in his gospel. It is both a pointer to the event of the resurrection but also as a "sign of the times" as to what it means as a consequence for the Temple and Temple worship. I also raised the question last time as to what resurrection life might practically mean to us today and how our lives might become pointers and signs to God's presence and work in our lives. In looking through the lens of this incident I aim to provide some pointers as to what that might include.

**This public event** in Jerusalem, at the heart of national life, comes just after a private event in an obscure town (even in Jesus day) in Cana in Galilee. Here was the first sign of water turned into wine at a wedding. A sign of fullness, abundance, overflowing generosity as of gift. The law came through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. This is not the economics of scarcity and payments but of gift and generosity- which still required a bit of work to draw water, fill the jars and serve the wine.

The miracle at Cana had been hidden. Only his disciples and the servants (and his mother) knew about it. The cleansing of the Temple was a public action in a place central to the life of Israel. It acts a judgment to the whole apparatus of organised religion- not just on a corrupt and dishonest form of it.

**John puts this incident at the beginning of his account**, the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) at the end. They organise their material differently for different emphases. Nonetheless they link together with the same idea where they link with the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (*Mark 12:1-12, Matthew 21:33-46, Luke 20:9-19*) and the punchline "*the stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all*". A reference to *Psalms 118:22-23* where the foundation God had chosen was disdained and treated with contempt becomes the anchor, the alignment point, the keystone. Rejected by the builders but chosen by God to be the stone on which it all hangs together.

John writes about real things. Water, wine, bread, blindness, death, life. The spiritual and the material are in no way held apart. He bears witness that the word of God has been made flesh "Jesus is God's presence in his very self"<sup>1</sup>. John focuses on the role of miracles as pointers to the ultimate creation of a new heaven and a new earth. They are "semeia"- **signs** that signify this reality. This may lead to total rejection or rejoicing- depending on whether we grasp the meaning of it and gifted by God to be open to understand it. Yet there is a constant refrain from within all the gospels where the

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<sup>1</sup> Newbegin L. *The Light has come* WB Eerdmans 1982 p25

**authorities and the people ask for a sign.** For example, in *Mark 1:20* ***“By what authority are you doing these things?”*** The demands for a sign is a sign of unbelief. As an attempt to validate who Jesus is by setting him to jump through the hoops of our own standards of what can be trusted by experience and validation that we can verify to our satisfaction rather than faith as a gift from God to be received in and through the work of the Holy Spirit. So, when in *Matthew 12:39* and *Luke 11:29* Jesus is asked for a sign- the only sign that they will be given is the sign of Jonah. *“The Teachers of the Law and Pharisees spoke up. “Teacher we want to see you perform a miracle.” His reply?*

*“..... You ask for a miracle? No! the only miracle you will be given is the miracle of the prophet Jonah. In the same way that Jonah spent three day and nights in the big fish, so will the Son of Man spend three days and nights in the depths of the earth.” (Matt 12)* Here in **John 2** is the same answer pointing to the resurrection( v19) *“ Tear down this temple and in three days I will build it again.”* This reply appears as an accusation in the other gospels at his trial and is misquoted and misunderstood. It fails the test of legitimate evidence to his guilt. *“Looking to find some evidence against Jesus in order to put him to death. Many witnesses told lies against Jesus, but their stories did not agree. Then some men stood up and told this lie about Jesus. “We heard him say, “I will tear down this temple which men have made, and after three days I will build one that is not made by men.” Not even they, however, could make their stories agree.” (Mark 14:57ff).*

**The Temple itself included the whole site. We are still in the business of building temples, this time to Jesus.** The largest in area is the Basilica of the National Shrine of our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil at 1.32 million m<sup>3</sup>, but most regard St Peter's Basilica in Rome as the largest in terms of the actual church. Poor old St Paul's is 22<sup>nd</sup>. Even Liverpool cathedral is bigger. The Temple included various courts. The setting here is the outer court yard- that of the Gentiles. It was a convenience to have animals and birds close at hand. People travelled long distances (as illustrated by the crowd at Pentecost) and to purchase them fresh and properly verified for use had a logic and practicality to it. As indeed did changing the money into Temple approved currency given as most coinage bore the Emperors image, or some other heathen deity.

The “whip from cords” may have been made from rushes which Jesus used to drive the traders and their goods out of the court. He overturned the tables used by the money changers and poured out their money on the ground. He told the dove sellers to take the birds away. The reason he gives (v16) is to *“Stop making my Father's house a market place.”* His objection here is to their presence and practice not so much a comment on their dishonesty. That insight is reserved for *Mark 11:17* *“My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the peoples of the nations. But you have turned it into a hideout for thieves.”* It was a startling act. It implied challenge not just to the traders but to the authorities who encouraged and permitted the practices and profited by it in acting as a revenue stream for the upkeep of staff costs and the continued building redevelopment. **It would be understood as an act of Messiah.** But if so, under what

authority? If Jesus authority was of God- what was the proof? The proof would be a **sign. A miracle**. Can Jesus do the signs of Messiah and authenticate his actions? The devil had helpfully previously suggested a miracle that would do the trick. Jesus replies. “*Tear down this temple and in three days I will build it again!*” “**Tear down**” can be seen as breaking up, untying, dismantling as well as dissolving life, killing. Then the claim “ in three days I will build it again.”

His critics are incredulous. It took 46 years so far to build it. It would take through to AD64 to finish it. It lasted just 6 years before the Romans destroyed it in AD70. **John explains that it was his body not bricks and mortar he was referring to.** The Temple was destroyed by the Romans but it was not Jesus who destroyed it but their unbelief and intransigence. Yet there is a renewed place where God dwells, where sin is taken away and dealt with. Not by sheep, cattle, pigeons and the commodification of religion but by Jesus himself. Herod’s public building and Jesus body would be destroyed. Jesus by rejection and crucifixion. It carries a double meaning in that sense and is why Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (*Matthew 23:37-39, Luke 19:41-44*) because **they have failed to understand the sign of the times**. The dwelling place of God is not in the organised, expensive complexity of formal religion with its hierarchies of priests and functionaries and magnificent buildings but in Jesus. “*No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side has made him known,*” (*John 1:18*). This is the temple where God dwells. **It is a sign of the end of religion**. The third day will see the manifestation of that power and glory. Only after that do the disciples themselves understand and believe. Starting the creation of a community enabled by the Holy Spirit to grow into an ever fuller understanding of Jesus in the light of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The whole apparatus of Temple, Sabbath, circumcision has become redundant.

Yet there is still a risk today for the church to failing to examine old patterns of understanding in the light of new experiences of the Holy Spirit in bringing in new people and new generations to faith. As Vanier writes “*Jesus reveals to us that his body’s the dwelling place of God where we can find life. But we often seek life in the culture of money and forget that we too are a dwelling place of God.*”<sup>2</sup>.

**Money brings power and power brings money.** We can make an idol of money even in being seduced into worshipping it in the “name of doing good.” We are surrounded by a culture of money. Rather than as a means to help people it becomes a need in itself. “Whatever sells.” If profits are greater. Great. Selling to make more money to create more consumers willing to spend even more of their money. Creating convenience online and in shopping centres and retail hubs to buy more than we actually need. It cultivates an acute individualism. Me. My family. My group. Collecting the badges of wealth. But miss directed, misspent it fuels greater injustices, conflicts, destructiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Vanier J *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* Darton Longman & Todd 2014 p 63

**The place of holiness, the place where God dwells, is of healing, forgiveness in and through the broken and risen body of Jesus.** God has *pitched his tent among us* (not a magnificent temple). A fellow pilgrim walking through the desert of life with us, a presence to people, a presence that will be in relationship. A communion in community. We human beings are called to be a home, a dwelling place of God if we keep and love his words, the words of Jesus. He and his Father will come and dwell in us. Paul writes:-

*“Don’t you know your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourselves but to God. He bought you for a price. So use your bodies for God’s glory.” (1 Cor 6:19,20).* Such an inward reality leads to an outward reality. Living out of the divine centre. **The purity of that to “will one thing.” I would like us to think for a few minutes of the spiritual discipline of simplicity. To move away from defining people by how much they earn to valuing who they are.**

The bible clearly speaks about the exploitation of the poor and the accumulation of wealth. Even challenging the common-sense view of economics in the right to own private property for the covenant people *“for the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” (Psalm 24:1)* The Jews had direct experience of empire and the vast inequalities of wealth that had been forged in the brickfields of Egypt as former migrant workers, now a burden and a threat to the Egyptian economy and thus treated harshly. The rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer. The year of Jubilee was to provide debt forgiveness and a regular redistribution of wealth- a reset button rooted in the belief that wealth belonged to God, not human beings.

Yet materialism existed then just as it does today. *Psalm 62:10 “If riches increase do not set your heart on them.”* The Aramaic word for wealth is “mammon” which Jesus talks about as a rival god. *“No servant can be the slave of two masters, he will hate one and love the other, he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Matt 6:24)*

It is God’s intention that we have adequate provision. Enforced poverty is an evil. Creation is good and to be enjoyed but simplicity knows contentment whether we have more than enough, or just enough or not enough. Paul writes *(Phil 4:12,13) “I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learnt this secret, so that anywhere. At any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or to, little. I have strength to face all conditions by the power Christ gives me. “*

**The problem with greed is it leads to arrogance** and the loss of perspective for the Christian life. Simplicity is difficult as it directly challenges our vested interests and lifestyles. Jesus speaks into these anxieties, fears, false alliances and corrupted trust.

*“Instead be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you and he will provide you will all these other things” (Matt 6:33)*

**This is central.** Not the desire to get out of the rat race, or redistribute the world's wealth, or concern for the environment but if the central concern is true all those other things will be put in their proper perspective. It gives a "joyful unconcern" based on trust. It is not living without things as an aim, for those without things can love it the most. You can live a simple life but still be filled with anxiety. If we understand and believe **that all we have received is a gift** and of what we have is cared for by God it helps us to live freer lives. If we believe what we have we need to hold on to, it will not be available to others.

**We live by grace.** We depend on air, water, sun even if we end up paying for it by the utility companies harnessing it for power and our fresh water through pipes. Yet if we are tempted to think what we own and utilise is by our own efforts alone, a drought or accident reminds us of our dependency. By seeking God's kingdom first, however, may still bring hardship but it is not characterised by anxiety but by hope and faith. It is also marked by generosity. To have our goods available to others. We cling rather than share because we are anxious about tomorrow. So, we hoard rather than help. We can share because we know God cares.

Yet if we become noisier, busier, a market place, a shopping centre invaded by superficial needs and trivial things we are no longer a source of life and love of others. To be aware of that sacred space within us. To reflect. To contemplate. To wonder. The inner place to receive the light of the Spirit, the peace of God. Where we make our life choices and from which our love for others flows. A love that flows from the heart to lose the binding chains of injustice, to share bread with the hungry, love for the needy and lonely. **Welcoming "other" as a sign to them of the compassion and forgiveness of God** - Resurrection life.