

Cleansing of the Temple

Readings: Malachi chapter 3, verses 1-4; John chapter 2, verses 13-22

The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple is one that disturbs many people. There is anger and violence in this story. Jesus lays about him with a whip and creates havoc as He overturns the tables of the money changers. It all seems to be so out of character with Jesus. But that's because we have been indoctrinated to think of Jesus as meek and mild and we are very selective in our understanding. Nor do we allow for the possibility of a righteous anger which is entirely unselfish. Yes Jesus was angry. But not because of anything done to Him. He was angry on behalf of God. I shall come back to that, but first let us uncover some of the other layers of meaning in this story.

One is that cleansing the Temple was an implicit claim by Jesus to be the Messiah

300 years before the prophet Malachi had said that, when the Messiah came, he would cleanse and purify the Temple. 300 years later the Temple had become a virtual den of thieves. Its outer courts were a glorified market place where people were conned into buying the animals which they would offer in sacrifice. If you had walked all the way from Galilee to offer a sheep, chances are the poor animal was knackered by the time you arrived in Jerusalem. And blemished sacrifices were not acceptable to God. So buy an unblemished one in the Temple – at a price. If the only money you had was a Roman dollar that was not acceptable. It had to be exchanged for a Temple shekel – at a rake-off exchange rate. Fact is the place needed cleansing. Which was precisely what Malachi said the Messiah would do. And Jesus, who never openly claimed to be Messiah was, by this action making an implicit claim. The same is true of His entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. That too, was an implicit claim to be Messiah.

Secondly Jesus is asserting that the Temple must be a House of Prayer for all nations

The very way in which it was constructed militated against this. It was divided into four distinct areas. The outer court was reserved for Gentiles; i.e. non-Jews. Then there was a court for women. Then a court for men. And then a court for priests. Finally there was the Holy of Holies', a place where only the High Priest could enter and then only once a year. Guess where the trading in animals was conducted alongside the currency exchange deals — you got it! In the court of Gentiles! How could any Gentile could be expected to worship in that atmosphere? The fact is that racial and sexual discrimination was built-in to the very structure of the Temple and its worship and Jesus challenges all that would hinder true worship which is in spirit and in truth.

You might think that we have gone beyond that kind of discrimination today. Which is true. But, when I began my ministry 50 odd years ago it was still the accepted thing that non-members should be excluded from Holy Communion and this was done by tacking on the communion at the end of the normal service. And discrimination is more subtle today. It is expressed in attitude and atmosphere. And Jesus' challenge is still relevant. We should not put any barrier in the way of enabling people to access God.

Which brings me back to the anger problem. It might disturb us to think of an angry Jesus and to contemplate the violence of His action. But the clue to a proper understanding is to be found in the story itself. When the disciples tried to come to terms with what Jesus did they recalled a word from the Psalms; "Zeal for thy house will consume me". (Psalms 69:9) That's what provoked Jesus' anger. Not that he was retaliating to personal attack. But because God was being dishonoured and the purposes of God were being thwarted. The Temple was supposed to be the House of God in which God was accessible to all – it had become the very opposite.

And this has a frightening relevance to today. My first reaction when I read of the Muslim reaction to the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed being published was to be horrified. But then I thought – these people have a point. Their anger was at the denigration of someone they revere. They

went over the top in their response. Their anger became a murderous hatred. There is no justification for murder which is what they resorted to.

But compare that to the way Christians react when Jesus Christ is used as a swear word or when Jesus is pilloried in comedy sketches on TV or on the stage. We shrug our shoulders and say nothing. It is perfectly acceptable in today's non-judgemental society. I sometimes wonder which is the worse reaction – the Muslim or the Christian.

The fact is that there is a place for anger. We should be angry that people go hungry when there is no shortage of food. We should be angry at injustice. We should be angry when Truth is traded for expediency.

So what relevance has this story got for us today? It comes down to the nature of our Church life and whether it helps or hinders people in their search for God. And it poses the question of how much we care when the purposes of God are frustrated.

I give you one example. I once chaired a Church Council when an item on the agenda was a request from the Local Authority that we make a room available for the counselling of drug addicts in our community. That's all – counselling. The Church Council said **No**. People argued that we couldn't have drug addicts on the premises when there might be children around. The fact that proper safeguarding procedures would be put in place didn't dissuade them. The answer was **No**.

And I thought of the incident of Jesus cleansing the Temple so that God might be accessible to all and could have wept were it not for the fact that I was very angry.