

3 Lent 2018

Well. Just when you were thinking that Lent had some pretty serious texts, and deep things to think about, along comes an action-filled story, with Jesus whipping up some direct action in more ways than one, scattering livestock around the Temple precinct and casting coins left, right and centre before a crowd that watched with open mouths. Who was this person? Why did he do this? Why take to himself the phrase “my Father’s house” when referring to the Temple? The questions just keep coming, even from the outraged Temple authorities – “what sign can you show us for doing this” – that is, what Messianic miracle will prove to us who you claim to be – and Jesus answers in the most runic fashion – “destroy this temple and in three days raise it up.”

Messiahs are not supposed to tear things down. They are not supposed to chase stallholders out of the Temple courts. They are supposed to be loving and kind, gentle and meek. This Jesus is most certainly none of these, at this moment. But in the long run, what he says and what he does make perfect sense, after the resurrection, for no Temple is needed, no special place where God is to be found through arcane structures and dark mysteries. The Temple is walking around in their midst, the Temple, where God’s glory dwells and is to be met, is talking to them, touching them to make them whole, listening to them and teaching them directly.

Temples, churches, synagogues, mosques, tabernacles, chapels, cathedrals, gurdwaras and all the other holy places where worship is offered and the deity met, are all temporary, transitory places. They cannot restrict the presence of the God of the universe to such a small space. But we are finite, and need to deal with finite matters as we try to grasp the infinite. We need a place, a centre, through which we can encounter the transcendent. We have a deep-seated need for that place to be impressive, special, slightly mysterious. Better still is if that place has areas which are forbidden, off-limits, as that reinforces our belief that God can only be accessed in a formal way, through the mediation of

others – experts, holy people, those who have a special connection with the divine.

Jesus demonstrates that that is not true. God can be met anywhere, through anything or anybody. This is especially true for the baptised. They have Jesus Christ as close to them as their clothing – why do they need some half-explained venue to get closer to God? The baptised cannot get any closer to God than their breath – God is that close to us.

And Jesus takes direct action against those who would make it more difficult to get close to God, rather than easier. The Temple authorities, in a well-intentioned attempt to keep the place holy, had decreed that only Temple money could be used in its courts, so ordinary shekels had to be exchanged for special shekels. The Temple authorities had decreed that only specially approved animals and produce could be brought to the Temple as an offering for sin, for thanksgiving, for intercession – hence the large livestock market and provender stalls that filled the outer courtyard. Jesus reacts violently to this – making a whip, driving people out – because prayer is to be made in the Temple, not profits. Anything that keeps people away from God, that makes it harder for them to get through to the God who loves them and welcomes them is anathema to Jesus. He is fired up with zeal for access to God, because he himself is that access and he wants people to recognise that. The fact that it takes his death and resurrection for his disciples to reach that understanding shows just how difficult that is for us, weak mortals that we are.

So, do we, in some grand Lenten gesture, get rid of our buildings and our finery, our pomp and our traditions, for simple, direct one to one worship of Almighty God? No, for that was not what Jesus was doing. He didn’t want to destroy the physical Temple in Jerusalem, he just wanted people to use it properly, to be able to access it fully and freely. So our Lenten gesture is not to pull our buildings down, but to open them up, to make them more welcoming, more accessible, more understandable, so that access can be easy and understanding of what we do can be complete.

How easy is it to get our minds around what we do this morning? How much of what we do is habit? How much of what we do is simply mouthing words and going along with the flow? Look carefully at the words we say together – they are profound, powerful, God-filled. Even the hymns we sing, the parts of the service we sing, are as God-filled as the spoken parts – they are all drawn from Scripture, no one made them up – they just took them as a unit and put them together as there were no better words to express our love of God, our worship of God, utter dependence on his mercy and grace, our amazing access to a holy God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Look at the objects we surround ourselves with on a Sunday. Candles to show the presence of God, bread on a plate, wine in a cup – because Jesus told us to share them like that – simple, ordinary elements of everyday life transformed into objects that take us beyond ourselves and into the very presence of God. And we do it together, because we are not created for solo living. God made us who we are so that we can live and worship and share together – that is the purpose of the creation, that is our purpose as we worship together.

And sometimes direct action is required to bring people closer to the God who loves them. That is why there is an emergency winter night shelter every night in the borough until Easter, because God does not want people sleeping on the streets, and the structures that were in place in our borough were not enough for the large number of rough sleepers we have. And so we knit, and we donate, to take that direct action. There will be a challenge to direct action on Tuesday night, when two eminent theologians come to the Barn to talk about climate change from a Christian perspective. Our consciences call us to direct action every day, when we are confronted with need, of whatever sort, in our daily life – it is part of our redeemed humanity.

So let us be bold in tearing down that which prevents people from meeting easily with the God who loves them, and may we rejoice together in all that our loving heavenly Father has done for us.