**John 2:13-22**

**True Worship**

Other than the crucifixion story, there are only two other stories that appear in all four Gospels: the Feeding of the 5000 and the cleansing of the Temple. So the fact that these stories are recorded in all four Gospels indicates just how important they must be. And it’s the second of those, the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple that we are thinking about this morning.

Now, even though the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple does appear in all four Gospels, there is an important difference we need to note. In the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the story comes during Holy Week right at the end of Jesus’ ministry. But in John’s Gospel, the story comes right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Now we know that each Gospel writer had a different intention in putting their story together, and we know that Matthew, Mark and Luke were more historically accurate and that John tends to use stories about Jesus as metaphors and symbols. And so it is not a historical error for the story to be in two different places in the life of Jesus. In reality, the event probably happened during Holy Week. It is likely that this event was the last straw for the religious authorities and it was for this reason that they decided Jesus had to be killed because he was now threatening the very fabric of the religious institution.

But John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel because the Cleansing of the Temple, for John, is a metaphor for the ministry of Jesus in its totality. John’s understanding is that Jesus came to renew the Jewish faith: to challenge our institutional views of God and to bring both passion and purity back into the worship of God.

That passion and that purity had been lost for a long time and, as we shall see from our Gospel reading, Jesus was standing in the line of Zephaniah all the Old Testament prophets in condemning the people of Israel for their apathy towards God.

So let’s review this story and see what we have to learn from it in our context today.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover. This was the custom for all Jewish males to go at least once in their lifetime to Jerusalem for the Passover. So when Jesus arrived in the city, there would have been thousands of people there; a huge crowd crammed into the narrow city streets and an incredible bustle and noise in the temple itself. A chaotic scene – but a highly excitable and thrilling experience for everyone there.

And, of course, it was a time for peak business for all the religious artefact traders; selling lambs and oxen and pigeons for sacrifices and appropriate food to eat for that season and all the other bits and pieces that would be associated with Temple worship.

And Jesus walked into the Temple, into the midst of all the chaos and the noise and the hustle and the bustle. And he looked around him at the pilgrims and the prayerful, the tradesmen and the touts, and his emotions rose to fever pitch. It would be wrong to suggest that Jesus got caught up in the heat of the moment. We read in verse 15 that Jesus made a whip of cords. He took time to reflect and time to make the whip: the actions of temple cleansing were not done in the heat of the moment. He had time to reflect and think through what he was going to do…

And then the anger of Jesus becomes evident: he drove out the sheep, he drove out the cattle, he scattered the money all over the floor, he overturned the tables, he threw out the dove sellers. No-one was spared the anger of Jesus in that moment. And then he shouts, “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

This act of Jesus is an act of disruption: not disrupting the events of that day in the Temple but an act of disruption that cut to the core of the historic Jewish faith and all it stood for. This is a moment of crisis: not for the dove sellers and the money-changers: there would always be more doves to sell, more currency to trade. This was a moment of crisis for the people of God.

Jesus was saying that the old way of doing faith was no longer appropriate, that the heart of faith had become lost in the ritualism, that it was passion for God that had sold out, not pigeons for sacrifice. Jesus is confronting the people of God with a deeply uncomfortable truth: this was a moment for them to re-assess. Was it enough for them to be tied to their ritualism or did they need to find the heart of their faith once more?

It’s important to say, though, that Jesus was not opposed to Jewish tradition and not opposed to the rituals of Judaism *per se*. Jesus was a Jew, born and brought up, steeped in the law and the ways of the synagogue. And it was *because* he was a committed Jew that Jesus overturned the tables in the temple.

He was acting in the line of the prophets, in the line of Micah who, hundreds of years before had written: “Will God be pleased with thousands of rams, with 10,000 rivers of oil…God has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus was acting in the line of the prophets, in the line of Amos who challenged Israel with these words: “’Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them,’ says God, ‘but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.’”

Jesus was acting in the line of the prophets, in the line of Jeremiah who proclaimed: “Do not trust in the deceptive words, ‘This is the temple of the Lord’. But act justly. Do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow. Do not go after other gods. Then I will be with you in this place.”

Micah knew, Amos knew, Jeremiah knew, and Jesus knew that true faith cannot ever be expressed through empty rituals but that the rituals we undertake must be an expression of the real worship of our lives: Justice, Kindness, Humility, Non-oppression, Care for the Marginalised, Faithfulness and Righteousness.

If our worship does not engage with these attitudes and actions, it is not true worship.

God is not primarily interested in beautiful worship. He is interested in pure worship. And the two are very different indeed: though not mutually exclusive.

But, by the time Jesus visited the temple on that day, the Jewish nation had lost sight of the difference. The purity rituals had become rituals of discrimination: Jews in the Inner Court, Gentiles in the outer court, Men in this section, Women in that section, Sacrifices the poor could afford, sacrifices the rich could afford. In the beauty of the ritual, the heart of purity had been lost and that had made Jesus angry and, as a prophet, he had to make a stand…

Jesus stood in the line of the prophets, calling for his religious institutions to forsake exclusive purity and forsake a desire for beauty and embrace instead compassion and acceptance and love for the marginalised.

And if we are take worship seriously as a church in Enfield, we must be sure that what we do on a Sunday is only reflective of the values we hold the rest of the week. Our true worship is worked out Monday to Saturday as we care for the vulnerable and the weak and the hurting, as we share the Good News of God’s love with our neighbours, as we model the forgiveness and patience of Christ within our families. That is our worship; that is the worship God requires of us, and what we do on a Sunday is a summing up, a bringing together of all that.

In a few moments time, we will be sharing in Holy Communion and we will hear the words of Christ at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Do what in remembrance of him? Participate in a religious ritual just because that’s what we always do at the same time each Sunday? Surely not!

If that is what we are engaging in, I think Jesus would walk right down the aisle throw the bread and the wine to the floor and overturn the table we gather round.

Do what in remembrance of him?

Show compassion to one another.

Forgive one another.

Tell our friends and neighbours the Good News of salvation.

Pursue justice and mercy this coming week as we protect the rights of the vulnerable.

Challenge the politics of greed and over-consumption in our materialistic world.

Do *that* in remembrance of him.

And then the bread and the wine, which symbolise our union with Christ will be filled with meaning.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

We are to join with Christ in the line of the prophets and pursue true worship, truly pure worship. Ironically, the pursuit of purity will inevitably mean that this church must get dirty but that is the way of Christ, that is the way of the cross.

As Micah reminds us, “What the Lord requires of you is to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Fulfilling that command must be our priority, our life’s work.