
Jesus the new Temple

a sermon on John 2 : 13 - 22

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As it was near the time of the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple precincts he found the dealers in cattle, sheep, and pigeons, and the money-changers seated at their tables. He made a whip of cords and drove them out of the temple, sheep, cattle, and all. He upset the tables of the money-changers, scattering their coins. Then he turned on the dealers in pigeons: "Take them out of here," he said; "do not turn my Father's house into a market."

His disciples recalled the words of scripture: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews challenged Jesus: "What sign can you show to justify your action?" "Destroy this temple," Jesus replied, "and in three days I will raise it up again." The Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple. Are you going to raise it up again in three days?" But the temple he was speaking of was his body.

After his resurrection his disciples recalled what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Preamble :

It would be a mistake to think of the great Temple in Jerusalem as being anything like even our greatest cathedrals in the Christian world. It's significance was far, far greater than any cathedral. The most holy place of the Jerusalem Temple, an area of a few square metres, was understood to be the very seat of God on earth. Some of you may have read Philip Pullman's 'Dark Materials' books, in which case you will understand the image of a hidden window into another, parallel universe. I guess it was something like that, although not a window into some *other* world – that sort of thinking doesn't really belong in Jewish thought – but a window into the world as God intends it.

From that holy place flowed all the creative energy of God. If that energy were to cease, the earth itself would cease to be and it would return to the waters of chaos. Out of that dangerous place – a place which only the high priest could approach (and even then only after considerable and complex sacrificial rituals lest he be consumed by the energy field, as it were) – flowed all fruitfulness, all creativity, all healing, all forgiveness, all restoration, all justice.

Not so long ago I was at a reunion event where a man from my distant past was giving a short address to us and various assembled teenagers. It was a heavily Evangelical address and as he fixed us with his eye he spoke about Jesus, the “man who came to die”. It was distinctly creepy. Was Jesus on a suicide mission? It’s a theory so fraught with problems (e.g. Judas protesting in *Jesus Christ Superstar* that he’s been ‘used’ by God to bring Jesus to his death). We’ve just sung of Jesus as ‘Prophet, Priest and King’, but not a man with a death wish.

Certainly we preach that his crucifixion and resurrection are world-changing events, and they are – but *that is with the benefit of hindsight*.

The death of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, people with learning difficulties or mental illness (including a member of my own family), Jehovah’s Witnesses and others in the Nazi death camps – these appalling events have had a hopefully irreversible effect on our view of human nature (did anyone see the TV programme on ‘Darwin’s dangerous idea’ last week?) – it’s led since to a deep sense of the inalienability of human rights, racial equality and so on. These things are now locked into Western consciousness (if not its practice) as a result of those terrible events – but no one in their right mind would dream of suggesting that those people were sent by God to die so that we would all sign up to the ‘Declaration of Human Rights’. That would be a ludicrous nightmare of a terrifying God. So would the idea – which I once read in a book by David Pawson – that Jesus was sent by God with the sole intention that he should be crucified; he used the revolting image of a victim (Jesus) being lowered into a tank of piranha fish (us sinners).

Even if there was indeed a horrible inevitability about it given the ministry he was charged with, to shrink Jesus's entire mission down into some weird suicide mission is ridiculous.

Surely, this big public act recorded by John — the so-called 'cleansing of the Temple' — is a truer sign of what Jesus was about. The crucifixion was a *consequence*. If you want a single snapshot of what Jesus the man was about, don't think of him on the cross — think of this reading; think of him in the Temple.

If you want to know what the power of God looks like, look at the crucifixion. If you want to look at what Jesus is about, look at this story of the 'purification of the Temple'. Does that make sense to you?

Jesus was a teacher, a healer/exorcist, a **prophet** certainly (Jews and Muslims accept this), God's Anointed Leader (Muslims accept this, and some — a few — Jews). But being a teacher, healer, prophet didn't have to put him on a collision course with the Jewish authorities.

A claim to be **Messiah** — a political rôle — would put him on a collision course with Roman authority (Pilate has him executed as 'King of the Jews') but not necessarily with the Jewish authorities. It probably did, but only because it provoked their Roman masters (as the High Priest Caiaphas points out in John 11). Claiming to be Messiah would not have been 'blasphemy' as one of the Gospels records the high priest's reaction at Jesus's trial before the Sanhedrin. A *stupid* claim maybe — a delusion of grandeur — but not blasphemy.

Claiming to be **high priest**, however, means claiming to be God's representative, with the authority to forgive sins and

define law. Such a claim could indeed be interpreted as blasphemy by the sitting tenant of the post.

Claiming the high priesthood is quite a different matter. That clearly would put Jesus on a collision course with the Temple authorities, and the High Priest in particular. There were many claimants to the high priesthood, and the current high priesthood had a shaky claim to the job; widely perceived to be illegitimate (in terms of Jewish lineage, quite apart from their status as Roman vassals).

It's hard to understate The Temple's significance. It was the ground of Judah's security, the guarantor of God's reconciling and healing presence, the preserver of good order, the seat of Judah's wisdom and scholarship, its treasure-house, its very identity as a nation. Imagine Britain without a Parliament, government or monarch; no legal system to speak of; no health care system and no higher education; no banking system and no financial reserves; no institutionalised Church (whatever you think of the institutionalised church it at least serves as a reference point for all the other religious activity – imagine the chaos without it). You're looking at something like present-day Zimbabwe, except that Zimbabwe does at least have a Church.

Most of the other claimants to the high priest's job, so far as we know, based their claim on having the right family tree. They were claiming that their tribe or family were the rightful heirs of the position. Jesus's claim seems to have been based on his relationship with God. Whereas the others' vision of what they'd do with the high priesthood wasn't really much more than the age-old politicians' promise of an end to corruption and perhaps a promise to stand up to the Roman masters, Jesus's claim (if indeed he made such a claim) was based on a thorough-

going vision of what the Temple was established by God to be : a fountain of justice, faithfulness to God, integrity, fruitfulness offering healing for a wounded nation, restoration of the dignity of its weakest members, a base for truly spiritual teaching that changed lives. It seems to me that in pretty much every act of healing, every parable, every symbolic action – including (when it came to it) his execution – Jesus was acting out what the true Temple would be like.

If you want to see God's power in action, look at the crucifixion. But if you want to see what Jesus was about, look at what he says and does about the Temple. The fact that what he says and does about the Temple brought him to a cross becomes enormously important in hindsight. It gives an unforgettable picture of a God whose power is in weakness, whose power is love; a God who is able to take humanly-created disasters – whether it's our own sins and mistakes whose consequences threaten to engulf us, or whether its the terrifying sins of whole nations, like the holocaust or (God knows?) the disasters that will follow from man-made global warming – and somehow weave the disasters back into the story of redemption.

But Jesus was not on a suicide mission. He was not a 'man born just to die', even though his death and resurrection mark him out for all time. He was a man of God with a vision and a mission : and it is that vision and mission that we are called to be about, too. Yes, Jesus advised us not to embark on that mission without weighing the potential cost – there may be a cross to bear. But our purpose in life is not to be martyrs in some grisly arena. When he gave his disciples the 'Lord's Prayer' to say, Jesus told them to pray 'Lord God, spare us the hard trials' (the real meaning of 'lead us not into temptation') just as he himself prayed in Gethsemane

‘Father, let this cup pass from me’. That should give us a clue, if anything should, that Christians are not called to be martyrs, on some pious suicide mission.

Our mission is to be the Temple which is his body : bearing in the Church the sins of the world, yes, but being the seat of forgiveness and new life, the place of healing, the place of wisdom, the place of spiritual government for all the nations, the place from which all creativeness and fruitfulness flows.