

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Lent 3 (year B)

Exodus 20: 1-17 Ps 19 1Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2: 13-22

In speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

“The Passover of the Jews was near”: so begins today’s gospel.

Maybe, the gospel writer wants us to what time of year it was, and perhaps he is giving an explanation of why Jesus was going to Jerusalem – in celebration of the great festival- but the phrase also points us towards something deeper, as the story of Jesus’ visit to the Temple unfolds.

“The Passover” feast marks God’s great act of liberation of those who came to understand themselves to be God’s people; God’s intervention as the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt and set out towards the promised land as the book of Exodus tells. It is believed to be the festival with the longest history of uninterrupted celebration that we have records of. It encapsulates a central Jewish understanding about God: that God is the God of liberation and redemption from all that enslaves.

It is in the atmosphere of this festival that Jesus goes to Jerusalem. In John’s gospel this is shortly after his first “sign”, the miracle at Cana. Our gospel today is the next story he tells about Jesus’ ministry. As the city is full of people caught up in remembering the story of their liberation, Jesus goes to the place that is now the heart of that celebration: Jerusalem, the Temple. There he violently disrupts proceedings in the outer courts of the Temple. To imagine this scene it is good to remember that the Temple was built with outer courts surrounding the inner court of the priests and the Holy of Holies. These courts limited access to the holiest part of the Temple – the outer courts being the only part of the Temple that women or non-Jewish men could enter. What Jesus found – the cattle, sheep and doves (to provide sacrifices) and the money changes (to make sure that no Gentile coinage was taken into the Temple) would have been in the outer court: the court of the Gentiles, the entry point to the Temple. Those coming to offer their worship to God first negotiated these bustling and busy courts, and the required commercial transactions.

Jesus response is to clear these courts – to empty them of the commerce that had become associated with a formal sacrificial system and a particular understanding of preserving the purity of the Temple.

It is a very dramatic act.

It is a very violent act – making a whip of cords, turning over tables, losing the massed animals into the city

It is an extremely controversial and provoking act in the holiest place of the nation

Many theology historians believe it is the single act that sealed Jesus' fate and galvanised religious opposition to him, as they saw it as a great act of blasphemy. If the Temple symbolises God's presence in the midst of the nation, this attack on the Temple is was, to them, an attack on that presence.

The time of Passover is near, the time of God's great act of liberation and Jesus clears out the courts of the Temple.

There is no doubt that it was a deeply symbolic – a sign of what Jesus was about.

Over the centuries many have given it meaning – sometimes seeing it as an attack on the whole Jewish religion, or on its sacrificial system, or on commerce in religious buildings.

Here, as so often in John's gospel, what Jesus says after his action is important. As so often his opponents ask for a sign of his authority, and in this case he offers the ultimate sign of his gospel: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up", meaning not the great edifice of the building around him, but his own body.

This statement is far more radical than turning tables and driving animals out of the Temple. He is claiming that in his own death and resurrection he will be revealed as the place of God's dwelling, abiding with us.

The time of the Passover was near.....

Isn't Jesus showing what the liberating action of God looks like in person?

It is the authority to sweep away all that gets in the way of true worship of God, which is the fullness of our freedom.

To sweep away any system that becomes an end in itself rather than an instrument of drawing closer to God.

To sweep away all that is not of God that begins to control and enslave us.

It is the authority to become a place of pure worship in all you are living and being.

As Jesus makes the journey towards his death and resurrection, reactions to him reveal all that can deaden the human heart's response to God, all that obstructs our way towards the experience of God's holiness.

Some of those things had their origin in helping us to recognise that such holiness is powerful and transforming – and needs to be approached with attention and awareness. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” – God's action in our lives is not something we can control. As the Hebrews discovered in the Exodus, the route to freedom is not always comfortable or predictable and sometimes the familiar things, even if they are holding us back, feel more reassuring.

On Jesus' journey to the cross, his death and resurrection he challenges all in his own religious tradition that stops people seeing the God who is revealed in his life and the God who is revealed at work in their lives too. He carries a false set of beliefs about how God acts in history, what it must be to be the chosen, anointed one of God, how God's love is revealed, right into death, and is raised to new life as the one who reveals what it is to be God's Son, to share God's Spirit at work in human life. He shows us God's holiness anew.

As we journey with him to the cross and through the cross to Easter, perhaps it is a good time to reflect on where we meet God's holiness in our own lives, and what we need to let go of in order to draw nearer the Holy of Holies in our own lives. Do we have the equivalent of having to negotiate the outer courts of the Temple bustling and complicated, before we can offer the worship that our hearts desire to the One who holds us in life? How might Jesus want to help us clear the way to him in our own hearts and lives?

How might we ask him for that help today?

A Collect for this third Sunday of Lent offers us a simple prayer to start:

Eternal God,
give us insight

to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen