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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
March 4, 2018 ~ “Lent 3”

We are moving swiftly on through the Lenten season – and already the tone and pace has begun to change noticeably, particularly as we listen to our Gospel reading. You might think that this is an odd place to put this particular reading. In fact, in the other three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – it is the cleansing of the Temple which is the main cause of the arrest of Jesus during the final week of his life, whereas in the Fourth Gospel it is placed after the account of the changing of water into wine at Cana.

But as we read the passage today, we will not be particularly surprised at Jesus’ behaviour in the temple – for surely it was and is quite wrong to be using God’s house as a market? However it is likely that no one was more surprised at the behaviour of Jesus in the temple than those who were actually there doing the buying and selling. You see, it had become the normal practice – possibly even a tradition – for such things to happen, for the ‘marketing side of worship to flourish’ as one writer has put it – and for the petty corruption to become an aspect that everyone had come to expect and live with. We all get used to how life is and it always takes a fresh pair of eyes to see that something is wrong. So it is that Jesus not only sees it all as highly offensive but he does something about it – in a highly confrontational way. It is hardly surprising that the Jews respond by challenging him and his authority – for it was, after all, their livelihoods that they were being deprived of by this itinerant preacher and they didn’t like it one little bit. So there is a highly charged conversation between Jesus and the Jews.

But, if you look carefully, there is no resolution to the argument and it seems likely that everyone leaves the scene still extremely angry and cross. Even his disciples were probably very concerned at the inflammatory way in which Jesus dealt with the situation – there are ways and means of dealing with things and at least some of them were probably very fearful – though John acknowledges that after his resurrection “his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken”.

But then John records this in the next three verses: *“Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man”*.

In other words, Jesus knew human beings all too well and did not really trust them, particularly those who were new to the faith, because their faith was not sufficiently rooted for them to be dependable, to be people on whom Jesus could rely. Those are strong words and give us some food for thought. Therefore the question is posed: how can we ensure that our faith is strong enough so that we are the people on whom Jesus can depend today?

Maybe to answer that question, we have to go back to the Old Testament – to the book of Exodus chapter 20 – and the 10 commandments. What exactly are they? Simply put, they are 10 useful rules to help us live God’s way. They were originally given to the people through Moses, the leader who had led the people out of slavery in Egypt. And it was Jesus who neatly summarised them into two rules – “Love God and Love one another”. Simple. Easy. Straightforward!

So when Jesus sees the scene in the Temple at Jerusalem, he is incensed. What he finds offensive is that God’s temple, set apart to be a place of holiness and prayer, is filled instead with buying and selling, profiteering and cheating. Elsewhere, we are challenged to regard our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel, Jesus doesn’t just rant and rage – he does something about it.

Lent gives us the golden opportunity to do something about our lives, our temples. During these 40 days, we are challenged to look carefully at our lives and how we live them; to look at our priorities and see if they are in the right order; to see to it that we grow and develop into dependable, trustworthy people of faith on whom Jesus of Nazareth can continue to build the Church.

We know we are called to be people of holiness and prayer. So is our ‘temple’ full of rubbish and dirt that needs to be thrown out? If the answer is ‘yes’, then the space that Lent can give us is the golden opportunity to reflect upon our lives, to look closely and critically at who we are – and, if we don’t like what we see, to try to do something about it – now.

Amen.