

Under Construction
Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian
Sunday 7th March 2021
Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: John 2: 13-22 – Jesus clears the Temple Courts

Introduction:

Here in John's Gospel, the clearing of the Temple takes place at the beginning, whereas in the other 2 gospels it is mentioned – Mark 11:15-18 and Luke 19:45-47 – it is placed in the week before Jesus dies, just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Why the difference?

Rudolf Bultmann, the great New testament scholar of last century and expert on the compilation of the gospels, is reported to have suggested, tongue in cheek, on one occasion that it was because a wind blew through the window into John's study and mixed up the manuscripts. That when he put them back together he got them in the wrong order!

Actually, almost certainly the placement of this incident near the beginning by John was no accident. John's gospel was later than the others. It is called the 'spiritual gospel'. John writing in older age reflecting on what happened with Jesus, not so concerned with a correct historical timeline (Luke had that sorted), but the spiritual significance. The fact that he radically changes the placement of this story suggest strongly there is spiritual significance in the change, it is here right at the beginning for a reason! It is designed to provide a frame for his whole message about who Jesus is and what did he come to do.

So what is the key message here? this is what I think it is:

'The end of oppressive religious practices and the beginning of spiritual liberty.'

Let me unpack this:

There are 2 other key differences in John's account compared with Luke and Mark.

1. He omits the bit about the temple becoming a den for thieves.
2. He includes the bit about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in 3 days, connecting that with his own death and resurrection. This saying is in the other gospels, but not connected around the clearing of the Temple.

Both of these changes are important.

Omission of the 'den of thieves'. In Luke and Mark the reason for clearing the Temple seems straightforward – corruption of a legitimate practice. People did have to buy animals for sacrifice and change their money into temple currency; the issue was about exorbitant mark up! The worshippers were being ripped off by the religious leaders!

In omitting this reason John actually draws attention to an even bigger scandal: the whole religious system is a rip off!

It is a consistent theme of Jesus' ministry, one that was a major reason the religious leaders arranged for him to be killed. In Matthew 23 there is a long passage outlining Jesus' concerns. He condemns them, repeating 7 times "woe to you teachers of the law and pharisees" and then on the 8th attempt he calls them "snakes and a brood of vipers". It could not be more strongly expressed!

What was the problem?

The temple was a place where:

1. The very presence of God dwelt (Holy of Holies)
2. It was to be a place of praise and worship.
3. It was a place people came to for forgiveness and restoration.
4. It was meant to empower people to live lives that honoured God!

Jesus outlined his grievances in terms of

- The hypocrisy of the religious leaders, who did their religious duties for outward show yet failed to attend to their hearts.
- The hierarchy they built up that gave them power and denigrated others. They were prejudiced against women, sinners and those from other racial groups – prejudices Jesus routinely railed against.
- They place onerous burdens on the people with their impossibly difficult network of petty laws and regulations and requirements for constant animal sacrifice!

Jesus' action in clearing the temple points to a bigger truth – the need to clear away this religious straight-jacket that oppressed people when meant to free people!

But wait, there is more:

His reference to destroying and rebuilding the temple *and* connecting this with his own death and resurrection is *about* freeing spiritual life from the confines of physical bricks and mortar, a building!

The temple was *so* precious to the Jewish people! Yet as the centre of spiritual life it was *so* fraught! After a history of building temples and having them denigrated and destroyed by invading armies, Herod the Great had finally rebuilt the Temple. Taking 46 years to build, it was finished about 15 years before Jesus was born! It was so precious, yet in just less than 100 years it was gone! Destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, only one wall, aptly named 'the Wailing Wall', remained!

Jesus was saying loud and clear: to limit your spiritual life to the life of a building is completely doomed! You need a 'temple' that transcends bricks and mortar. And he offers that very thing in a wonderful multi-layered, ever increasing circle of meaning. I think there are 4 layers or courts of this new 'temple' Jesus offers.

1. Jesus – he is clearly referring to himself when he says he will destroy the temple and rebuild it in 3 days. And if indeed the temple is a place where God dwells, a cause for praise and worship, a seat of forgiveness and restoration and a transformative power..... that is Jesus! Now and for all time, transcending time and space, bricks and mortar! The temple of God is embodied in Jesus Christ. But there is a second level:

2. You and I as temples of the Holy Spirit.

At the point where we invite God into our lives at a deep spiritual level, when we, to use Paul's language, are in Christ and he is in us, then we become temples of the Holy Spirit:

"your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you..." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

But wait, there is more:

3. The people of the Spirit form a collective Body of Christ that is also a temple!

"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Ephesians 2: 19-22

That is... the church is the people, not the building.

So when, in Communist China, the buildings were taken off the churches in the late 1940s, the 'church' that was the people emerged from that phase of persecution in the 1980s thriving and significantly bigger in numbers!

The goal is that we, together with other Christians around the globe, form this living body of Christ as a place where 'God dwells in our midst', it is a place of 'worship and praise', grace and mercy' where people are 'empowered to serve God'!

But wait – there is more:

4. All creatures as God's temple.

There are theologians, including my friend Alistair Donaldson from the Laidlaw Christchurch campus, who have been working on the biblical idea embedded in Genesis that the tabernacle and temple are but mini universes, that the whole world is His temple, that the whole universe is a place where God dwells, worship and praise should abound, mercy and transformation are dispersed, and people are empowered for service!

Jesus, me, us, the whole universe – Temples of the Living God!

What a wonderful vision! *What blocks it from becoming fully realised?*

Just like Jesus clearing away the barriers to freedom and life in that Herod's temple, what do we need to clear away?

An image that helps me is the personal wardrobe image. Do you have a clear out of your wardrobe every now and then? Or do you keep it cluttered up with things past their use by date that you never wear? Like an old denim jacket I bought in Hawaii in 1988, not moth bitten and shabby yet for some sentimental reason I keep it!

But sometimes another member of household sweeps in like Jesus and clears out the wardrobe...without even telling me!

So what does stand in the way of us being all we can be as temples of God?

Jesus had a perceptiveness and a zealous righteous anger about clearing things out! Do we see what needs to be done? Do we have the zeal to do something about it!

For example

1. *In my life* – what are the things that stop me from being filled to overflowing with God, a person of praise and grace, empowered to serve God? If Jesus spoke to me right now, what would he command gone from my life to make room for him?
2. What about us as the body of Christ here at Cashmere – if Jesus walked in today what would he want to clear out? I know a story of a colleague who arrived in a new church and felt 'prayerfully' that the choir and choir master dominated the church and needed to be cleared out of the way if God was to move... so one Saturday night he went over to the church and took the choir stalls out with a chain saw!! It was not popular! It may have been wrong! *But* it makes you think, what are the barriers in our life together that prevent God's presence, praise, mercy and empowerment?

I think we would be naïve to say 'nothing'!

3. What about the world as we know it?

Right now we have a good example of action to eliminate a negative, the drive to get rid of COVID-19. We are attacking it with zeal!

What about NZ's issues of child poverty? The issues of housing for our first home buyers?

The government say these are goals, but progress is slow. I love the way the Salvation Army weighs in both practically and prophetically on those kinds of issues. What about us?

And on the macro scale: Creation Care – do we have the kind of zeal Jesus had when it comes to clearing out the barriers to a clean green planet earth?

Conclusion

In the Northern Hemisphere it is spring time *and* Lent! Both lend themselves to spring-cleaning!

What do we need to clean out of the temple that is our bodies, our churches and our world?