

JOHN 2:12-25
WHERE WE MEET GOD!

What makes you angry? You might like to think about that for a moment! There's a reaction to that question that says "the Christian should not be angry" and we can quote a Bible verse to back that up! Then we watch something on TV about poverty and the plight of children or about abuse and domestic violence – we find ourselves reacting to these pictures in a way that we can only describe as being angry! Does that reaction take us by surprise? Do we find ourselves dismayed by that reaction? Or do we consider that an entirely appropriate reaction to what we've seen? What then do we do with that anger? How do we channel it in such a way that we can make a difference to the world in ways that are good? These questions are all part of our being human; everyone will react in these kinds of ways, sometimes at the same things, sometimes at different things.

"Will the real Jesus please stand up?" Last week, we began to look at the picture of Jesus painted for us in John's gospel under this broad heading – "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" We are looking at the evidence presented in the Bible, the picture of Jesus painted there so that we can understand better who Jesus is and what He has done. We do this so that our faith will be stronger. We trust someone better when we know them better; we are trying to understand Jesus so that we can believe Him more and trust Him better. Last week, we were confronted with Jesus who can perform miracles, who can change water into wine; John called this a sign. We met Jesus the Son of God in whom the power and energy of God breaks into our world at a wedding in a village in Galilee. We were brought face to face with Jesus who has the power to transform our lives. Today we are brought face to face with Jesus who is angry, full of zeal and passion and we see that anger directed at people who, from their point of view, are going about their day-to-day business; and so we ask why? We were once told about "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" – today's story blows that apart!

The temple is the setting for today's story. The temple – that grand building at the heart of the city of Jerusalem. This was the third version of the temple in Jerusalem; the first had been built by Solomon and is described in 1 Kings chapters 5-8; it lasted 3-400 years before being destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar when he attacked and looted the city and took the people into exile. The second version was built in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the city was resettled and lasted some 500 years. This third version built by Herod, begun in 19BC, and was designed in a series of courtyards. The outermost courtyard was the Court of the Gentiles, then the Court of women, the Court of the priests and at the very heart, the Most Holy Place where God 'lived' and the High Priest went into the presence of God with sacrifices once a year. The temple stood at the heart of city life, at the heart of the nation's life and was the place where the people came to meet with God; the temple was the place where God lived and the place where people would come to meet with and encounter God. Our story takes place at Passover time, one of the three great national feasts, for which people came to the city to worship and to celebrate in the temple. We presume that may have been the reason for Jesus to visit Jerusalem and the temple too.

The theme of the Temple runs all way through this story. In our Christian tradition, we don't have the same notion of 'sacred space' as runs through the notion of the temple. We understand that God is everywhere and so we meet Him in all kinds of places. We don't even regard our building as sacred space, as *the* place where God lives and where we encounter God. Our building is called 'Church' because it is the place where the Church comes for worship; we understand that God promises to meet with us as His people whenever and wherever His people gather; it happens

that most of time we meet in this building, but if this building burned down tomorrow and we met for worship in the school or the pub, God would be there with His people! 'Temple' in this story means one thing with two expressions: 'temple' represents God meeting His people, God and humanity coming together for God to bless us and for us to glorify God. There are two expressions of that meeting in this story: first of all, the building called the temple; secondly, Jesus' body, the 'temple' that would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days!

Jesus walks into the temple: what makes Him angry? *"in the..." (John 2:14ff)* People were coming to the temple from all over the known world, Jews coming to take part in the Passover. Other people had set up in business to sell them animals, birds and the like to take into the temple as offerings and sacrifices; it was unreasonable to expect people to bring these offerings hundreds of miles with them, so these traders set up tables to sell offerings to the pilgrims. You were surrounded by the noise of sheep and birds, of people shouting and selling. Then there was the money for the temple offering – this offering could only be given in a particular form of money. Silver from Tyre was especially pure silver and only that money could be used; there were the tables of money changers, dealing, taking your ordinary money and changing it into temple money and they charged you a percentage for doing it. What makes Jesus angry?

Worship is a wonderful privilege! I love Psalm 84 because here is someone who loves worship and expresses that love wonderfully. He longs to be in the house of the Lord and not so much for the place and its beauty, but for the presence of the Lord Himself. There is a deep longing in his soul to be in the presence of the Lord so that the Lord can bless him with life and grace and peace. Maybe he is one of these pilgrims, just about to embark on the journey to the great festival and this is what he longs to find when he gets there. *"I would rather..." (Psalm 84:10)* and his focus is on God because he goes on to say *"For the..." (Psalm 84:11)* Jesus goes into the temple in that spirit, longing to be in the presence of God and to find quiet space to pray and to seek God or to bring an offering for the awe-filled worship of the God who is full of majesty and splendour. What does He find? Noise and hubbub. "Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep." (Don Carson)

Jesus is angry because God is not glorified by what He sees. *"Get these..." (John 2:16)* Worship is to glorify God, but God is being pushed out by the buying and selling. No-one in that sacred space could turn their minds to God in prayer and worship because of the noise of the market! Jesus is angry because God is not glorified and *"Zeal..." (John 2:17)* Dull, pompous, self-important, obscure, sentimental, irreverent, superficial, lifeless, cold, ill-prepared, theologically inappropriate – these are some of the words that people use about worship offered in churches in our age. Is God glorified by that kind of worship? We live in a world where people oppress others, the poor are exploited, women and children are abused, people are left homeless or refugees, often because of the greed of others – is God glorified by that kind of human behaviour? These are just two examples: how do we react when we find these? Jesus was angry when He found these, both of them, because He was passionate about honouring God. It is easy to lose that passion and become accustomed to less than the best and to accept things that we should never accept. His passion came out in His visit to the temple.

There's a second expression of 'temple' in this story. People wanted to know where He got the authority to do what He'd just done! He didn't answer but gave us one of these enigmatic sayings for which Jesus became famous: *"Destroy..." (John 2:19)* What on earth is that all about? Some people obviously took Him literally and it

became an accusation: *"Then some..." (Mark 14:57f)* and this became a thread in the story created to bring Him down and send Him to the cross. At the time He said it: *"The Jews..." (John 2:20)* It would have been quite impossible, of course and yet that was never what Jesus meant. Remember, 'temple' is about God and humanity coming together, the place where God encounters us and we encounter God. We imagine that what comes next was a note from John as he writes this story down: *"But the..." (John 2:21)* After the resurrection the disciples understood this enigma.

Here's the reason why Christians don't have temples! The ultimate meeting place of God and humanity is Jesus. The ultimate Christian temple, the place where God and human nature meet, is Jesus Himself. When He talked of the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days He was talking about Himself and the disciples saw that after He was raised from dead on the third day. As human beings we are made for worship; there is something in us and about us that is only fulfilled by worship; we bear the image of God and it leads us to worship and to seek after something beyond ourselves. This is an innate human desire and we see something of that expressed in Psalm 84, this longing for God, this longing to be in the presence of God and such an encounter will satisfy our souls. Christians believe that this desire for worship, this need to encounter God, is best fulfilled in Jesus. It is not about being in a special place, but in a faith-relationship with the person of Jesus.

Christians don't have temples because we have Jesus. Let me explain. The temple was built to keep people at a distance from God; the walls and courtyards were to invite people in, but also to keep people out! Only the High Priest could go through the curtain into the Most Holy Place, the innermost sanctuary where God lived. At the precise moment when Jesus died, that curtain was torn from top to bottom, symbolically saying to the world, "the door is open; come in!" Jesus is the way by which we come to God and encounter God. Because of Jesus, God pours out His blessing on us and fills us with grace, peace, hope, forgiveness; because of Jesus, God listens to and answers our prayers; because of Jesus, God saves the world from all that is sinful and dark; in Jesus our seeking for God finds its reward and fulfilment. We don't need a temple; we have Jesus; in Jesus heaven and earth meet. Where do we find the blessing of God for our lives? In the faith-relationship with Jesus!

Will the real Jesus please stand up? I'm beginning to discover that this question might be dangerous! Do we want Jesus to stand up when He is angry and full of zeal for the Father's honour? What is there in us that fails to honour God correctly? Do we share that passion for the glory and honour of God? Are we made angry by things in our church and our world that take away from the glory of God? Yet, in Jesus we find our heart's desires. We long for blessing of God on our lives (even if we might not put it like that!), to be filled with grace, with the Spirit, with hope, peace, forgiveness, and in Jesus these longings are satisfied. In Jesus, the eternal God has come into the world with grace and blessing and for faith in Jesus our hearts are satisfied. If this building were to be destroyed tomorrow, nothing of that would change; the blessing of God would go on and on for us because of Jesus. Jesus crucified and risen: He is the place where heaven and earth meet, for the glory of God and the blessing of the world.