

John 2:13-22 – Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Introduction

In John's Gospel, the account of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is placed right at the beginning of his' public ministry, shortly after the calling of the first disciples. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) it is recorded at the end of Jesus' public ministry, after his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. In the Synoptics it is this incident which so angers the Jewish leaders that they take active steps to have him put to death.

I am going to leave aside for the moment the question of whether Jesus performed this action twice or only once. What I want to focus on is the significance of what Jesus did. If we are to understand the significance of Jesus actions and words we need first to understand the significance of the Temple. What was the Temple?

The Significance of the Temple

The Temple was not the Jewish equivalent of our church buildings, not even the equivalent of a cathedral.

In every town where there were more than a handful of Jews there would be a synagogue. As you will know from the Gospel accounts and from the book of Acts, the synagogue was the place where Jews met regularly on the Sabbath day for worship – for the reading of the Scriptures, for a word of exhortation or encouragement, for prayer and for the reciting or singing of Psalms. The synagogues were, and are, the equivalent in Judaism of our church buildings.

But the Temple was very different. There was only one Temple in the whole of the land. It was designed by God as a gigantic visual aid. It was a picture of God's dwelling among his people, first in the form of the Tabernacle while God's people lived in tents and then, when they were settled in the Promised Land, in the form of Solomon's Temple. It was called 'the house of God' – a title never given to a synagogue and a title that does not rightly belong to our church buildings. Here, in the Temple, God was pictured as dwelling in the Most Holy Place, seated, as it were, above the cherubim that were mounted over the Ark of the Covenant.

This Most Holy Place was separated from the rest of the Temple by a curtain. The curtain reminded the people that while God lived among them he remained separate from them and not easily accessible.

The Temple was the place to which the people came from all over the land to meet with God, especially during the great festivals such as Passover.

The Temple was a place where sacrifices were made for the sins of the people, enabling them to come and meet with God – though only the High Priest could enter beyond the curtain into the Most Holy Place and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of sacrifice.

In these ways, and in many others, the Temple was designed to be a huge visual aid for the people of God.

Jesus Clears Out the Merchants

The temple we read of in John chapter 2 was not Solomon's Temple; that had been destroyed when the Babylonians invaded and took the Jews away into exile. Neither was this the second Temple, the temple they rebuilt on their return from captivity. This was the third Temple. Herod had started to build it in around 19 BC and, we read in verse 20 that it had been 46 years in the building. In fact, it was not completed until 64 AD, shortly before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

When Jesus arrived at the Temple he found people selling all manner of animals and exchanging money. The animals were being sold for sacrifice and this would have saved visitors the trouble of trying to bring a sheep from where they lived to the Temple, perhaps a journey of many miles. Also, the offerings of money in the Temple could only be made in special coinage. The common coins in Jesus' day were Roman and carried an image of the Roman Emperor. To bring such an image into the Temple was considered idolatry. The trade we read of taking place in the outer court of the Temple could therefore have been viewed as a useful service for worshippers. Why then did Jesus react so strongly?

Firstly, the Temple had been built for the glory of God whereas these merchants had turned it into a noisy marketplace. Jesus says "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" (Verse 16). The parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel also suggests that the trading that was going on was not driven by the desire to offer a public service but was driven by greed and involved the exploitation of the worshippers. Jesus says that they had turned the Temple into a "den of robbers" (Matthew 21:13).

Secondly, the outer courtyard of the Temple, where the trading was taking place, was the only part of the Temple which Gentiles, non-Jews, were allowed to enter. Jesus is recorded in Mark's Gospel as saying that the Temple was designed by God to be a "place of prayer for all nations." (Mark 11:17). This market effectively prevented Gentiles – the nations – from using the Temple as a place of prayer.

So Jesus drove the traders out. He drove them out because he was zealous for God's house – determined that it might be devoted to the worship of God and to the glory of God.

The Reaction of the Jewish leaders

The Jews – and here we are to understand the Jewish leaders, the Temple officials – asked Jesus for a sign to prove he had authority to act in this way.

They may have had in mind the prophecy of Malachi in Malachi 3:1-4:

'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have a people who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Malachi had spoken of the day when God himself would come to cleanse and refine his Temple and make it a place fit for the worship of the living God. The prophecy suggests that the Lord may come in the person of his representative, "the messenger of the covenant". He would be the one they looked for and longed for – suggesting perhaps that this might be the Messiah. In throwing the traders out of the Temple is Jesus suggesting the *he* is this divine representative? The very notion seems to them blasphemous. So they ask Jesus for his authority to do these things; let him provide them with a sign to prove his divine authority.

Jesus' response

Jesus responds with the only sign he will give them: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (verse 19). Jesus, of course, is speaking of himself – of his own body. He speaks of the way in which these Jewish leaders will deliver him over to death but that after three days, he will rise from the dead. How is this a relevant response to their question of his authority to cleanse the Temple?

Jesus is saying that he has authority over the Temple in Jerusalem because he himself *is* the Temple of God; he is the reality to which the visual aid of the Jerusalem Temple pointed.

He is the one in whom the living God has come to dwell (or to tabernacle) with humankind (John 1:14). The Temple could never contain God, Solomon knew that (see 2 Chronicles 6:18), it was only a visual aid, *picturing* God's dwelling with his people. But here in the Lord Jesus is the reality to which that visual aid pointed; here is Emmanuel, God with us.

He is the place of access to God. The Israelites went up to the Temple in Jerusalem to meet with God: where shall we go to meet with God? There is only one 'place' to go and that is to Jesus: Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). There is no special building or location to which we need to go to meet with God, but there is a special person, the Lord Jesus, for we are acceptable to God in him.

He is the place where men and women are reconciled to God through a sacrifice that blots out all our sins. The body of Jesus is the Temple in which the blood of atonement was shed. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one in whom the curtain that separates sinful humankind from a holy God is torn apart for ever.

He is the one in whom and through whom we can offer acceptable worship to the living God – a sacrifice of heartfelt praise.

Moreover, it is by this sign – by his death and resurrection – that Jesus will create the cleansed Temple spoken of by Malachi; not a physical building but a people drawn from every nation who will worship God in Spirit and in truth.

Therefore, Jesus has the right, the authority, to cleanse the Temple. He is the one to whom this Temple points. He is the one who fulfils Malachi's prophecy. He is the Mighty God come to visit his people.

This answer did not satisfy the Jewish authorities. Neither was it understood by his disciples at the time; they only understood after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Is it understood by us? Do we recognise from this

passage something of the glorious reality of who Jesus is and what he came to do? Do we understand the fullness of the blessings we have in him?

How Does All This Apply to Us?

The New Testament not only speaks of Jesus as the Temple of God, it also speaks of Christians, individually and corporately as temples of the living God.

We were created to live with God and for God to live with us. But sin made this impossible – we were cast out from the presence of God, banished from Eden. Christ's work in redemption consists partly in this: cleansing the temple – cleansing us by his Spirit. He comes to us to drive out all that is evil and wrong, all that cannot cohabit with a Holy God, and he comes to dwell in us by his Spirit: Paul writes, "In him you too [Gentiles alongside Jews] are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22); and Peter similarly says, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Here is a reminder of what we are – cleansed temples, a people in whom God dwells by his Spirit. The wonder of it!

Yet we remain an unfinished Temple – "we are *being* built into a spiritual house." We need Christ to come to us again and again – as, perhaps, he cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem more than once during his ministry. What are the things that remain in our lives, or that creep back into our lives, which stand in the way of complete devotion to God? We need Jesus to visit us again and again by his Spirit and cleanse his temple and make us fit for his dwelling.

What are the things in our church life that need to be driven out if we are to be a people devoted to God's glory? – note I said 'things' not 'people'.

The cleansing of these temples – of our church life and of our personal lives – is a deeply disturbing work of Christ by his Spirit. Let me share with you a personal confession. I find it deeply disturbing when my wife rearranges the furniture in our home. To me it no longer seems the home I am familiar with and am comfortable with. I find it disturbing. Moreover, at the moment we are preparing to downsize. We are getting rid of possessions which we have had for many years. It's difficult, for I have become used to them and do not always want to let them go. But what Jesus purposes to do in us is far more radical and far more disturbing. He comes to sweep away all that cannot coexist with him: to chase such things out of the courts of our lives and to rearrange the furniture of what remains. It's a deeply disturbing work.

Do we welcome the Saviour to his Temple or do we seek to keep him at arm's length? Are we ready for him to root out all that we treasure but which glorifies us and serves our own ambitions? Are we ready to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus"

Jesus was marked by a zeal for God and his glory. We need to have a character that is like that of the Lord Jesus, zealous for God and his glory.

This then needs be our prayer and our constant plea:

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate're that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne
And worship only thee.

Peter Misselbrook,

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