

Sermon for Lent III March 3, 2024

Let's talk about what was necessary for the great Temple in Jerusalem to operate. We might think it was simply priests and people for worship, but unless you've taken a deep dive into the Hebrew Bible, you might not know that there would be a whole lot more. There would have been a need for animals for sacrificial offerings, everything from birds to oxen. There would have been a need for people who would exchange the Roman currency for temple currency, so that people could pay their tithes with money that was not tainted. There would have been vendors of all sorts of things that folks who had come a long way to the temple to pray and to make offerings in petition or in thanksgiving would need, like appropriate and ritually clean food if folks were hungry, wine and water to refresh people. You get the picture. Because of the rules of Jewish worship, there had to be provision for folks who wanted to bring a pair of doves to the altar in thanksgiving, as Mary and Joseph did when they brought Jesus for the first time. It was what they could afford and they didn't own doves themselves, so they bought them from one of the vendors in the courtyard of the Temple.

So what do we make of this story from the Gospel of John, where Jesus comes to the temple and both literally and figuratively raises a ruckus? Is he saying that all those laws and rules about offerings and money changing should be thrown out the window?

Not exactly. This is about something else. This is about corruption. The vendors overcharged for their goods, just as we see when we go to an event like a ballgame, where you're a captive market for vendors. If you want to go to Washington to see a Nationals game, be ready to spend a good bit. A hot dog at the Washington Nationals Stadium costs something like \$7.50. If want a beer, a domestic beer costs about fifteen bucks, and if you want a fancy craft beer, it'll be several dollars more. Same with places like Disneyworld, or going on a cruise, where you are going to pay more for just about anything than you would at home.

In the Temple, these vendors overcharge. They have to make a profit as any small businessperson would, but the cost may be even higher because a percentage of their profit must be given to the priests of the temple.

When Jesus decries the corruption that he sees in these transactions, he's making an important statement, since overcharging equals usury and that is prohibited in Jewish law. He wants it stopped.

But is that all he is doing?

Take a closer look at the Gospel reading. What happens in response to him turning over the sales tables? The people around him ask "what's your justification for doing this?"

He answers cryptically, “destroy this house and in three days I will rebuild it.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? This temple took 46 years to build and it’s still not entirely finished.”

John the Evangelist helpfully adds that Jesus was speaking of his own body, rather than the building itself, and notes that the disciples remembered this after the crucifixion and resurrection, all those things Jesus had said would happen that they didn’t understand at the time.

But that’s the heart of this Gospel: Jesus is pointing toward the more important thing. Not an enormous building and a whole bunch of appurtenances and extra stuff that cost an arm and a leg. But meeting with God. What’s the purpose of a house of worship? It’s a holy place where you go to encounter God and be in relationship with God, right? But what if a holy place is the temple of Jesus’ body? What if the building is a distant second to the body of Christ? What if the most important thing is your encounter with God through your communion with Jesus Christ?

I was talking with someone earlier this week about how we worship and how the Eucharist, the taking of the bread and wine, is central to our worship in the Episcopal Church. Yes, we have beautiful buildings. Yes, we use elegant words to pray and to praise. Yes, we have a magnificent tradition of music that touches the soul.

But the centrality of the Eucharist, of our gathering together around Jesus' table to share the bread and wine, is what is truly at the heart of what worship is for. When we consume that bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, we take him into our body so that we are suffused with his presence, filled with his spirit, at one with the temple of Christ's body. The rest, lovely as it is, pales in comparison with knowing this.

I am well aware that our surroundings here in this precious space are occasions for beauty and awe and a sense of connectedness to God. And I am also aware that if the building fell down tomorrow, we could still feel beauty and awe and a sense of connectedness in the most direct way possible, by participating in this sacramental feast. So I urge you to be present to the God who loves you, the Christ who redeems you, and the Spirit who guides you, by coming to the altar to receive Holy Communion. If there is anything that can recharge your sense of divine presence in your life, this is it. We remember what Christ did for us and we feel him within us when we do that, which is exactly why we do it. Come to the altar, meet your savior there, feel him in your body and in your soul, and thank God for it.

Amen.