

Sunday 4th March 2018 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Lent 3
Exodus 20:1-17	Ps 19	1 Cor 1:18-25
		John 2:13-22
Lenten journey – the cleansing of the temple		

“The disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’” (Jn 2:17)

There is always something exciting about setting out on a journey: the promise of a break from routine, the unexpected things around each corner. We travel, we go on a journey, because we want to go somewhere – even if it is a familiar one. The most exciting journeys that we ever did as children were from our home in Pietermartizburg to our grandparents, who lived in George. It was always a two-day journey, through Kokstad, Mthatha, down the Garden Route – and as we got closer to George, the landmarks would become more and more familiar, and we would get more and more excited. And then there are other types of journeys: the journey into adulthood. Watching your own children grow. The journey through grief as loved ones die. Many journeys. The journey of loss and suffering. Journeys that shape us.

Lent and the journey to new life

We are just over three weeks into the season of Lent: our 40 days with Jesus in the wilderness; our journey to Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. It’s a journey which takes us to salvation, to new life. It’s a journey which introduces us to the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and evil and death.

Yet if I was a travel agent, trying to sell you a package advertising an exciting trip, at this point I would be struggling. There is nothing of beaches and sunny skies, no exotic locations, no interesting sights to see, no nice hotels. Instead, the journey we are on is a hard one.

The milestones, the landmarks, the sights we have seen thus far on our Lenten journey are hardly glamorous. In fact, they are depressing, sobering, solemn, bleak and uncomfortable.

We began on Ash Wednesday with the call to repent. “Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Do not cast me out from your presence: do not take your holy spirit from me.” (Ps 51:10-11). “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” “Return to the Lord with all your heart; leave the past in ashes and turn to God with tears and fasting, for he is slow to anger and ready to forgive.”

There are the Ten Commandments, which we said on Ash Wednesday and every Sunday during Lent – the law which sets us free, not to do as we please, but rather freedom which comes with respect for others, and protecting the weak.

Then – (Lent 1) the baptism of Jesus, reminding us of our baptism – and the words of the Father to his Son, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:11); words which God speaks to each one of us, embracing us as his beloved children; the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and the temptations we face, the wild beasts we encounter, the angels who minister to us.

And then last Sunday (Lent 2), Jesus speaks of his suffering and death, and then says such sobering words: “whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (Mk 8:34) Perhaps, if we are honest, we are not so sure about this travel agent, this journey. Is this what we signed up for? A cross? Suffering? Self-denial? Losing my life in order that I may save it? Is this the path to fulfilment? To new life? Am I on the wrong aeroplane?

The cleansing of the temple

Today’s Gospel (John 2:13-2) is even more uncomfortable. This is not Jesus the compassionate, Jesus the healer, Jesus the person at

prayer. Instead, this is Jesus the protester, outraged at the abuse of the sacred space of the temple, angry, disturbing the peace, causing havoc and chaos. We are indeed on a rocky journey, following this tumultuous and confrontational Messiah.

Let's spend a bit of time with this event, the cleansing of the temple. What was happening? Why the fuss? What was the problem? The cleansing of the temple is found in all four Gospels. However, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is found near the end of the Gospels, shortly before Jesus is arrested. In those Gospels, it comes just after his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem at the start of Holy Week. Welcomed by the crowds, his act of cleansing the temple is seen as a direct attack on the Jewish religious leaders, challenging their authority, and it is a key event which results in his arrest and crucifixion.

From what we know, those who were selling and trading in the temple were there legally. They were providing a service. The coinage that was used by people at that time had the image or head of the emperor, or a pagan god, and so was seen to be in contradiction with the 2nd commandment – you shall not make an idol of anything and worship it. Only special temple coinage could be used for purchases within the temple – and so there were money changers there to change the many different currencies into one standard unit. And then there were the sacrificial animals to be bought for worship. How much easier, surely, if the animals were there for people to buy?

But what perhaps begun as something of a convenience, or preserving the holiness of the temple, or enabling greater devotion to God, had become a way of making money off people, or defrauding them. Hence the words of Jesus to them, “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.” (Lk 19:46).

However, in John's Gospel, it comes very near the beginning of his ministry. The calling of the first disciples, the first of the signs – the water changed into wine at the wedding at Cana – and then the

Passover, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. His action is deliberate. He makes a whip. He drives the money changers and sellers of animals out of the temple area. He overturns their tables and spills their coins. He commands them to leave. “Stop making my Father’s house a market place. And John links this with words from Ps 69:9 “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

But then comes the dialogue with the Jewish leaders. Jesus says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” (Jn 2:19). The Jews assume that he is talking about the physical temple with its stones and columns; Jesus is talking about the temple of his body. He is pointing to his death and to his resurrection – the three days in the tomb, Good Friday and Easter. He points to the true temple – himself.

And so...

So, if we thought we were on a pleasure cruise, the holiday of a lifetime, we are certainly on the wrong train. And yet, remarkably, this path, this journey, is the path that leads to life. This is the way of salvation. This is the journey to freedom: to allow the Lord into our lives to cleanse us. To hear God calling us back to basics, to first practices: prayer and worship, a life centred on God, with everything else following from this. And all that we do as the people of God, our life together as the church, the body of Christ, is to point to Jesus. “He is the word made flesh, the place where the glory of God has chosen to make his dwelling... He is the reality to which the Temple itself points.”¹ Christ is the reality to which we as the church point.

The cleansing of the temple is not a judgement on St George’s Fair, or pledging, or the weekly Sunday collection. Rather, it invites us to take a careful look at any practice that exploits people’s vulnerability in the name of religion; and any practice within the life of faith and worship that is an abuse of power. The recent murders of policemen at Ngcobo police station, and the subsequent action by police which

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, 26

resulted in the deaths of seven people at the headquarters of the cult – the Seven Angels Church – are all fresh in our minds. It is sobering that this group calls itself a church – part of the body of Christ. But from what we read and hear, their actions and way of life bear no resemblance to the life of Christ to which we are called. Instead, we see spiritual manipulation and abuse of spiritual power and authority.

The cleansing of the temple also represents any event that shakes us up. The challenge to an ordination just before yesterday's ordination service, or the events surrounding the qualifications of a candidate at an episcopal election in Mthatha, towards the end of last year - times when the church has to examine its own life. The cleansing of the temple.

And a cleansing – certainly a shake-up – following last week's parliamentary debate and decision to amend the constitution to allow for land expropriation without compensation. Are we going to go the route of land grabs in Zimbabwe, with resultant poverty and suffering in the name of freedom? Are we going to continue to live with immense inequality and an unresolved history of dispossession? When the law in SA was used to move people off historic land and homes? When much of the land ownership in SA is as a result of conquest? I am frightened when I look down either of these paths. Are we able to find a middle path, a third way?

The cleansing of the temple is our gospel reading as we prepare for next week's Annual Vestry Meeting. From our Gospel reading: "Zeal for your house will consume me." My longing is that zeal for the body of Christ, the house of the Lord, will indeed consume you and me. And in the light of the tragic events surrounding the Ngcobo Seven Angels Church, I emphasise what our annual Vestry meetings are. They are part of good governance in the life of our church. Transparency. Playing open cards. Making sure that we are on the right track. They are a crucial time when we are all asked to come together, to take stock, to reflect and look back, to plan and look forward, to elect lay leaders. Let's be part of building up the life of the church, the body of Christ.

We have been wonderfully served in 2017, as in previous years, by a faithful team – those elected at Vestry last year. I hope that a number of them will be available for re-election. We rely on their wisdom, experience, and institutional knowledge. But we also as always need “new blood”, fresh energy, those whose time has come to serve in this way. Being on PCC is part of the hidden ministry of the church. A great deal gets done behind the scenes. We don’t see it, but it makes other ministries possible. Without good governance and wise hands and heads at this level, other things simply don’t get done, or are hindered.

CONCLUSION

Christ comes to cleanse us, to make us holy, to purify us; may God bless us as we continue on the journey to life.

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