

St. Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Sunday 4th March, 2018 – Lent 3

READING John 2: 13-22 (*Jesus Cleanses the Temple*)

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

How long does it take to build a church?

If you were listening closely to the gospel reading, you would know it takes a long time to build a temple. Forty-six years and counting, a work in progress. That means if it were this place, construction would have begun in 1972, and still be ongoing ...

One problem with all those years is that things become so familiar, it is as though it has always been this way. And familiar things aren't always healthy or helpful, despite the comfortable rhythms they create.

So I wonder: what is the church for? Is this church fit for purpose?

Jesus finds the temple is not fit for purpose. Things are so bad that Jesus is enraged. It is the time of the Passover, a critical time in the Jewish calendar. Jews today still mark the Passover as the great time of liberation. This is the moment when the God of our ancestors led the people of Egypt from slavery towards the promised land. The significance of that cannot be underestimated. It holds within it promise, identity, blessing, grace, love, salvation, God with us and more.

The reading this week from Exodus begins with a reminder. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20.2).

In other words, remember! Remember that our God is a liberating God. Our God is a just God. Our God is a gracious God. Remember, revere and honour.

So this is what Jews from all over the known world were doing in our gospel story. Which makes it easy to exploit.

For all who wanted to respond with gratitude to God; for all who wanted to be right before God rather than labelled a sinner; for all who wanted to be clean rather than unclean – you must go to the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover to offer thanks to God.

And the way you offered thanks in those days, was to offer animals – perhaps cattle, sheep or doves, as sacrifice to God.

I'm sure you can see where this is going.

You could bring your own animal for that offering. But in the temple there were inspectors to check they were perfect enough for God. Inspectors charge fees for their work. And then almost certainly, they would say your animal was not good enough. They or their friends had better ones to sell, and you had no other option.

Those who were poor and simply wanted to thank God were charged something like 15x the going rate. So they either couldn't afford an animal and therefore could not offer thanks to God, or they had to borrow money just to avoid being labelled a sinner.

Can you see the irony? Celebrating God's Passover liberation had become a new form of slavery and injustice. Something needed to be done, and a meek and mild response hardly offered freedom that the least of these deserved.

I wonder if there are things here that get in the way of who Jesus calls us to be? I'm not talking about whether one hymn or style of song is better than another, but of fundamental things. Do we know our purpose? Is this church and community fit for purpose? Is there anything we need to let go of or clean out as individuals and community to restore things to our rightful purpose?

These are very much Lenten questions. This is a time, forty days in fact, where we take a critical look at who we are as the people of God, as pilgrims on the way. It echoes a number of other forties in the bible –

Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days to prepare for his ministry; those who escape the slavery of Egypt after the first Passover wander in the wilderness for forty years before they are ready for the promised land. In the Scriptures, forty represents the right amount of time, a long and demanding time.

One reason it is long and demanding is that it can be hard to see what is wrong. Temple practices build up over time, and we get so used to them that it is hard to see they are so wrong.

Is our living fit for purpose in the ways of Jesus?

I am reminded of Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland whose name this church bears. There is a modest chapel in Scotland that was her temple, her church, her place of worship. I like to think it was fit for purpose because of what we know about Margaret. Although she was a monarch and presumably had anything she could have wanted, every day before breakfast, she would ensure the poor and hungry in her neighbourhood were fed. Her story continues to frame our identity, our thinking, our vision, our practice.

But there is perhaps a far more immediate way of working out what we might let go, and what we might embrace as the body of Christ in this place.

Jesus offers it in our gospel story as a sign. He claims that all barriers are removed because he has now become the temple. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up', he says.

Three days refers to Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus claim is radical. He says that no building can contain or constrict the love and justice of God. And no building is the holy of holies any longer. It is Christ who is the focus. And Christ removes all other barriers to God.

This magnificent building is only fit for purpose if it supports and encourages us as the body of Christ together, if it breaks open the good news of Jesus Christ, if it reveals the passion of this Lenten and Easter story to us.



This image (*The Temple in His Bones* © Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com) evokes in an artful way the mystery of Jesus being the new temple. He takes into himself, into his own body and being, the very purpose of the temple. What he offers is direct access to the Father. There are no gates, no bricks, no rituals, no injustices that can get in the way anymore. In the gospel of John,

Jesus speaks of this immediate access often.

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.

I am the light of the world

The barriers are gone. Which is why there is an offer here to come to the Lord's table. Here you don't need to have a perfect offering. Here you don't need to have everything in order. All you need is respond to him. So come to the table. Here is the place for all who hunger and thirst.

Let us be fed, so that we too can feed others, in the name of Christ.
Amen.