

**March 15, 2009**

“Destroying and Replacing the Temple”.

SCRIPTURE – Exodus 20 : 1 – 17, I Corinthians 1 : 18 – 25, John 2 : 13 – 22

Travellers to Britain are often surprised by the evidence of past widespread attacks on temples. There are hundreds of ruined and plundered churches, monasteries, and abbeys across the landscape. And many current places of worship contain defaced statues, smashed stained glass, whitewashed wall paintings, desecrated graves, signs of looted brass memorials and other past relics and treasures. This vandalism and destruction was carried out by kings and politicians, marauding armies, religious intolerance and warfare, even different brands of Christians on each other.

In today's Gospel John surprises us with a challenging picture of Jesus attacking the Jewish Temple, and predicting its destruction and replacement. And we notice that John's version of the Temple cleansing is significantly different to that in the other three gospels.

John puts the Temple Cleansing at the start of Jesus' ministry, not in Holy Week at the end, where Matthew, Mark and Luke place it. John's version has different details to the others, different Old Testament quotes, different and strange words from Jesus, and gives a different reason or meaning to the historical event.

John's Gospel is different. It is less chronological, and more focused on the theological and spiritual meaning of what Jesus did and said. John is later than all the earlier three gospels and uses raw material from them in a new way. John is mature thoughtful theological reflection on the life and ministry of Jesus, and its meaning for believers in Jesus and their lives.

The early part of John is a book of signs pointing us to who Jesus and his role as Messiah with teaching authority and divine power from God.

Jesus' first sign is turning water into wine, a symbolic message of how Jesus will replace the ritual waters of Judaism with the life giving wine of the Gospel.

Jesus' second sign is the Temple Cleansing which John tells us points to Jesus replacing the Temple and its sacrifices with his own one sacrifice for the world. The Temple Cleansing leads on to a series of other healing and cleansing signs of Jesus, all pointing towards the supreme sign of his saving death and resurrection for others.

1. Jesus attacked the Temple and its brand of commercialised religion.

The Temple was big business and made large profits from selling sacrificial animals and birds, and the changing of 'tainted' Roman money into 'pure' Temple currency. So Jesus made a whip of cords, drove out the animals, scattering the birds, overturning the trading tables, and strewing coins everywhere.

Jesus said: 'You shall not make my Father's house into a place of trade'. John notes in ominous words from Psalm 69: 'Zeal for your house will consume me' - perhaps a hint of trouble and death ahead.

So Jesus attacked the commercialism of the Temple, which was meant to be a place of worship and prayer to the one universal God and Father, creator and saviour of the whole world and all peoples. The Temple trading hid the real purpose of the Temple as a place where people could come to seek and find the true and living God.

Like the Jews of Jesus' day, it is easy and possible for the Temple and its needs and commercial maintenance to become more important to us than our spiritual faith and fellowship with God, and our mission and ministry to neighbours, people and the world. We easily forget that the Temple is really a service station for our life with God, and a base for sharing and living out together the Good News of God and his reality and love, to people around us.

We can easily belong to the Church for tradition and routine, or for loyalty and habit, for our children and family, for personal recognition, or to serve an institution, rather than to maintain a personal heart faith, and a religion of love and service to others that

points to a God of love.

Today's reading from the Ten Commandments in Exodus reminds us that faith is all about putting God first in our hearts and lives, and then offering ourselves in loving gratitude to God, so that he can use us to seek and live out right relationships to neighbours and people in society. As people of faith our life is all about love for God expressed in love, respect and service to our neighbours.

## 2. Jesus attacked the Temple and its exclusive religion.

Jesus was angry because all this trading happened in the outer court of the Gentiles of the Temple. Anyone from any culture or race could come into this huge outer courtyard. But only Jews could go beyond here into the inner parts of the Temple, just as non Muslims may not enter a mosque during prayer times, or non Hindus are not welcome to enter some Hindu shrines. Gentiles were seen as polluted and unclean because of their acceptance of the Roman occupiers, and their religion and culture, their politics, laws and taxes.

Jesus was angry at the exclusive, narrow, unwelcoming attitude towards Gentiles shown by the blatant take over and misuse of the Temple area set aside for non Jews to pray, worship and seek after God. Jesus clearly saw Gentiles as people who were also children of the one universal Creator and Father God, which the Temple stood for.

Christians have in the past, and still today sometimes do the same sort of thing. We can imagine that we have all of God and his truth and reality in

our church or sect or creed or doctrine. We can easily forget that God and his truth is greater than our grasp of him. We can overlook the fact that the human hunger, search and experience of God is so amazingly universal. We all need to see more clearly the universal God of creation and humanity at work in people of other churches, in people of other faiths, and even in people of no faith at all.

As Christians we know and experience God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ, and his life, death and resurrection for others. And we need to discover better ways to share that faith with humility and respect towards others. Our attitudes to the faith and religion, the customs and values, the traditions and convictions of those who are different to us can show Christ's openness and love, or they can display our own prejudice, fear and exclusiveness.

That's why we call ourselves Uniting rather than United Christians. How welcoming are we and our church to newcomers from other religions and cultures? Some do it well, as I noticed recently in the entrance foyer of Dandenong Uniting Church. There, small coloured flags from many nations hang from the ceiling as an unspoken sign of welcome that transcends words.

As followers of Jesus we share the Good News of God's universal and inclusive love to others by acts of welcome and hospitality, respect and humility, appreciation and humanity, understanding and reconciliation. These things bring people together rather than dividing them further.

### 3. Jesus attacked the Temple and its

### elaborate system of sacrifices.

John tells us that Jesus drove out the sacrificial cattle, sheep, goats and birds used in the Temple. It must have been quite a stampede! The prophets long before Jesus had also denounced such sacrifices as unnecessary, misleading, and irrelevant to a right relation with God, and to right attitudes and acts towards other people. Jesus attacked the elaborate system of Temple sacrifice as essentially our human attempt to influence and manipulate God who is always holy and loving towards us.

In our overseas travels since we retired, my wife and I have encountered human beings from different countries, faiths and cultures engaged in sacrificial offerings to God or the gods of their belief. In Bali people place beautiful hand made offerings of flowers, fruit and sweets everywhere to keep right with the nature spirits and gods. In Thailand Buddhist people seek good luck and blessing by placing money gifts in the right vessel on the right day or time in the Temple. In Nepal we have seen the Temple floor and village streets red with the blood of goats sacrificed to earn divine blessing.

The Temple cleansing tells us there is a new and better way to harmony and peace with God. Jesus predicts his own suffering and death for others as the end for human sacrifices and offerings to please God. 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days'. John explains that the temple he had spoken of was his own body.

Jesus' death and resurrection will

become his greatest sign from God to humanity. He will be God's one sacrifice replacing all others, and the Temple itself will be destroyed and replaced. Jesus' sacrifice will enable believers to live out of gratitude and love for God, rather than to get blessings and favours from God.

God does not favour or bless us because of our sacrifices to him. Regular worship, private prayer, generous offerings to the church, sacrificial support for good causes, selfless service to people, devotion to peace and justice in our community or overseas do not manipulate or make God love us. Jesus' sign of death and resurrection for us says God loves us anyway. When we do good things and make sacrifices for God they prove that we really know and love God who is love.

So the message of today's Gospel is that Jesus brings a huge revolution and change to grasp, faith, and relationship with God. Temples, sacrifices, earning God's favour, winning his blessing are superseded. Jesus opens a new way for anyone to come to God that is independent of what we do for God. It is all based on what God has done for us through Jesus and his death and resurrection.

In our Corinthians reading today Paul calls it the foolishness of God which is wiser than our human wisdom. For the message of the cross of Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God to create new people by faith. And Jesus says that the supreme sign of his authority and power is his life, death and resurrection for others. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again'. John is saying that Jesus himself will be our

living Temple and Way to God.

The Heidelberg painters brought a great change and revolution to Australian art. They rejected the rigid rules and styles of academic indoor painting. Instead they camped and painted outdoors with new freedom, new colours, new subjects, and new perception. People saw Australia with new depth, intensity, beauty, understanding and love.

Jesus does something like that with God for us. He opens up a new way of seeing God, relating to God, loving and serving God. He enables us to love and trust the one unseen creator and lover of all humanity. He enables us to experience God as a Spirit of love and goodness working in us and in others. By being God's sacrifice of love for us, he becomes the Temple where we may find the Father. Amen.