

Lent 2018

In October 2011, a group of protesters set up camp outside St Paul's cathedral in London. Their purpose, so it was claimed, was to protest against corporate greed right in the heart of the city of London. The cathedral was closed for some days because of concerns for health and safety, and, amidst the fierce public debate and frenzy that followed in the media, various views were expressed. Meanwhile, the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's were in a real quandary – while some of the chapter supported the right of the protesters to set up camp outside the cathedral, others were opposed to the effect it was having on those who would visit or worship. As opinions became entrenched and the chapter began to explore the legal options for evicting the protesters, the result was the resignation of two of the most high-profile members of the chapter, the Dean, and the well-known columnist and writer, canon Giles Fraser.

Occupy London, the London protest group was finally evicted from the precincts of St Paul's on the 28th February in 2012. The occupation of the cathedral precinct, the resulting closure of St Paul's to the public, along with the reason for the protest, brought to the forefront of many people's minds concerns about the nature and purpose of the Church and the role that an Established Church had to play within our society in maintaining the status quo, or alternatively in providing critical commentary and assessment of social and economic justice within our society and world.

Despite the hype, nevertheless important questions have been raised as to whether the Church, especially the Church of England has yet again become complicit with or even colluding with the status quo. To what extent then does the Church exist to uphold good order within our society or act as a voice for the discontented? Has the Church become too comfortable with the values of the world that it has forgotten its mission and message?

Today's gospel reading is fascinating from a number of viewpoints. It is interesting because the incident described, the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, is included in all four Gospels – an unusual phenomenon in itself as John's gospel is markedly different in structure and content from the Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But perhaps what is so unusual about this incident is that, because it appears in all four gospels that the incident must have been of such profound significance, or at least so shocking, that all the gospel authors remembered it and included it in their gospels. Even the most sceptical of Biblical scholars therefore acknowledge that this incident must have a historic basis. Interestingly though, the Synoptics, as usual, are markedly different from John's account, and we are thrown again into the debate concerning the reliable historicity of the gospels. You may note that while the Synoptic gospels all include the cleansing of the Temple towards the end of their gospels after Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, thought by many scholars to be a cleansing in preparation for his sacrifice on the cross, a parallel with the offering of the sacrificial Passover lamb in the Temple, John places this event at the very beginning of his gospel in chapter two, almost as if the Temple needed to be cleansed and made ready before his ministry could properly begin. So, we see the problem of regarding the Gospels as historically accurate accounts – here is a clear example of where they are contradictory in the order in which the incident is recorded.

Without going into detail as to why there is such a marked difference in the chronology, nevertheless we must admit that the image of Jesus driven to such anger that he plaited together a whip and drives out those with market stalls and the money changers in the Temple must have been a terrifying and evocative image. So what provoked Jesus to such anger and such action?

It is incredibly likely that the festival that drew Jesus to Jerusalem was the great Passover Festival. The Law laid down that every adult male who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was bound to attend the greatest of the Jewish Festivals. Indeed, Jews in the diaspora, from throughout the world never forgot their origins and faith and returned to Jerusalem at least once in their life to celebrate the Festival.

Integral of course to the worship of the Jews in the Temple was the sacrificial worship, and all Jews were obliged to pay a Temple tax to enable the worship to take place. With the arrival of Jews from throughout the world, various currencies would be used, and so the money changers would often exploit the most vulnerable, the poor, the isolated, the stranger and the alien, charging extortionate exchange rates so that faithful Jews would be able to fulfil their obligations. Perhaps what enraged Jesus so much was that this extortion of the vulnerable was taking place with the collusion of the Temple authorities, taking advantage of those least likely to be able to afford it.

Jesus' anger probably arose from three different causes. Firstly, there is the fact that the Temple had been built solely for the worship of God, and people's desire to worship and fulfil their religious obligations was being brazenly exploited by this parody of worship - the Temple itself was being desecrated. Secondly some scholars have suggested that, as the time of his own sacrifice as the Passover Lamb was near (even if that meant some years away if John's timing is to be believed), then the need for animal sacrifice as a form of worship or atonement for sin was now redundant. For centuries the prophets had warned the people of the need for sincerity of heart rather than lavish offerings without social justice and care for the vulnerable and poor. Thirdly there is the example of those with little religious knowledge or experience who might come to the Temple and find the overt commercialism and extortion of the faithful off-putting and completely opposite to its purpose of being a house of prayer. The very centre of Jewish worship might provide not an opportunity to deepen and nurture faith, but rather sicken even the most pious believer, negating therefore the possibility of an encounter with the Living God.

The cleansing or purging of the Temple by Jesus in his anger is a wakeup call afresh to each and every church. It calls for a re-appraisal of integrity and sincerity at the very heart of our faith and calling. If the presence of the Occupy tents within yards of the ringing of the cash registers and turnstiles at the entrance of St Paul's causes the Church to re-appraise its purpose and methods, it raises the larger questions as to what extent the Church colludes with the commercialism and financial mechanisms and ethics of institutions of our own day, and, if churches are unable to support themselves without resorting to such means, what does it say of the sacrificial giving of those who purport to be Christian in a so-called Christian country?

Our churches may not be cluttered with the money changers and extortioners of Jesus' time, but they are certainly cluttered with earthly ambitions and distractions which act as a total detraction from their purpose – which is nothing other than a house of prayer set aside for the worship of God and an encounter with Him. This is no more evident than in the recent and current power struggles and battles within the Anglican Communion, the main perpetrators of which seem not to be seeking the will of God, but an all-out victory at all costs. Similarly, the continuing scandal of disunity within the denominations with entrenched views and the occasional nod towards ecumenism – a prophetic glimpse to some far-off time when we will all be one – or another obstacle put in the way of the enquirer and innovator I wonder?

At a more local level what of our own church? There are many who give of their time and money generously, but it is also true to say that there are many within the Church who do so begrudgingly or with strings attached. There are of course the power struggles within each and every congregation – those vying for ascendancy, those wanting their own way, those wanting things to remain the same or made into a club of the likeminded who are comfortable in their own company and doing those things with which they are familiar? Jesus railed against those who exploited and used the Temple for their own ends; and the exclusiveness of many churches, a coldness, the arguments, the rightly or wrongly perceived arrogance of establishmentism, – anything that hinders the possibility of an encounter with God desecrates the house of prayer. William Temple, the great Biblical Scholar and former Archbishop of Canterbury in his famous commentary of John's Gospel reminds us “The place which should be ordered with the reverence appropriate to the dwelling place of God is (often) cluttered up with worldly ambitions, anxieties about our possessions, designs to get the better of our neighbours.”

And the quotation from Psalm 69 verse 9 'Zeal for thy house will consume me' provides the impetus for Jesus' actions in cleansing the Temple, reminding all of their obligations under the Law, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments which we have heard read today in our first reading from Exodus “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.” This surely must make us want to re-examine and re-assess our very being as Christians - and our mission and ministry as a Church. Worryingly, voices within the Church of England are maintaining that financial and ministerial resources are channelled into the so-called successful churches which are already numerically and financially sound while finance and ministry are increasingly being scantily spread throughout the rest of the parochial structure. This seems to be drawing back from what the Church of England has traditionally been, a societal church whose mission has been to serve the whole of society. Once again it will have implications for the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalised, the isolated, the alien and the stranger. There are no easy answers to the extremely challenging problems and questions facing the Church in the current age – but it begs the question – what are we here for? If Jesus were to appear today and challenge the very core and being of our churches, would we consider him to inspired and the Son of God, or merely an imposter?