

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

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Reading: Mal 3, John 2

Study: John 2:13-16

Psalms: 122, 27:4-6, 69:6-11, 27:7-10

As an adult male Jew, Jesus was required under the law to go to Jerusalem, to the temple there to celebrate the Passover (Exodus 23:17). Passover or feast of unleavened bread was one of the three main Jewish festivals- Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. It was celebrated on the 14th day of the first month (Nisan) – the full moon at end March or beginning of April.

A lamb or goat, one year old and without blemish, was sacrificed at this time as a reminder of the Exodus. They remembered the time when their fathers sprinkled blood on the doorposts to save them from the angel of death, and they were delivered out of bondage. Jews came from everywhere to celebrate the Passover – they were not to come empty handed.

It was probably the Passover of the year AD 28 that is featured here in our text. John explicitly refers to three Passovers in this gospel and probably a fourth (2:13, 6:4, 12:1 and in 5:1 simply refers to a feast of the Jews). Jesus began his public ministry at this Passover in AD 28 and completed it three years later in the Passover at which he was crucified.

The three other gospels also record a time when Jesus cleansed the temple, but they place it in Passion Week just before the Passover at which he was crucified. Many scholars argue that John moved this record to the beginning of Jesus ministry – but they cannot agree as to why! The records may be similar but this does not mean they are of the same event. If there were two cleansings we would expect them to be similar. It is quite possible that there were two separate occasions on which Jesus acted in this way. The merchants he drove out of the temple here at this first visit were probably back in the temple selling with three days – let alone after two or three years.

Back in January we were walking down the main street of Delhi doing last minute shopping. The merchants had all their wares overflowing onto the footpath. They were busy trying to get us to buy something when suddenly they were all scurrying to get all their stuff inside and close their shops. We wondered what was happening. Then we saw lots of police jumping from the back of a truck. They were making a raid on these shops that were illegally trading on the footpath. I thought of this as I walked down the main of St Mary's the other day. But you know as soon as the police had gone everything came back out again and trading continued. It was probably the same in the Jerusalem.

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Jesus entered the temple and found merchants selling animals for sacrifice, and other men sitting at tables changing money. Pilgrims who had come a long way found it convenient to be able to get an animal here in Jerusalem itself. At one point the merchants set up their stalls across the Kidron valley but now they were in the temple itself – probably in the court of the Gentiles.

It is likely that there was some collusion with the temple authorities but the text does not

indicate this. In the Synoptic accounts Jesus did said they had made the place *a den of thieves*.

Worshippers were obliged to pay the temple tax of half a shekel in Tyrian coinage. Exactly why we do not know. Some think it was because of the image on other coins. But it was probably because the coins used by the traders in Tyre were known to be pure silver – they were not alloys like many others. So the temple authorities demanded payment in Tyrian coinage. Money changers converted money into the approved currency for a fee.

Jesus was shocked to find this trading going on right in the temple. He made a whip from cord, probably that used to secure the animals, and flew into action driving the animals and the merchants out of the temple. Then He turned on the money changers scattering their money and upsetting their tables.

Jesus shook the place up. He acted a bit like the prophets of old, who often took to drama to convey a message from the Lord. However, Jesus was not seeking to show some future event. He declared by his own authority *Take these things away! Do not make my fathers house a house of merchandise*.

How could the people, especially the Gentiles, worship God with all this racket going on around them? 'Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there was noisy commerce'. The worship of God had sunk to a low ebb – it was not for the first time and not for the last.

The people thought they could worship God as they liked. They allowed this intrusion in to the temple, into the house of God, in violation of the laws of God. It was convenient for the worshippers they would have argued. They could get their animal quickly and easily and get on with their worship. They could be in and out of the temple in no time, their worship done and over.

Jesus was not into convenience –he was concerned about obedience in worship. He was not into the outward acts but was concerned about the heart. *You do not desire sacrifice ... but a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise* (Psalm 51). That is what the word of God says.

Acceptable Worship

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17). These words Jesus quoted when he cleansed the temple a second time but that are also appropriate on this occasion. Worship is worship of God. It must be focused on God. It must be what pleases him, not what pleases us.

Prayer is what we come to the house of God for. The Lord invites us to seek his face, to come before his throne. His throne is in heaven of course. How can one pray, how can one focus upon God who is Spirit, when there are so many distractions? We close our eyes that we might not be distracted.

Some churches are full of pictures and objects that are supposed to help in worship but that in fact hinder true worship. And even then with eyes closed people want to distract prayer with background music.

Then there is **listening**, listening to the word of God. How can we worship without hearing the words of God? The Psalmist delighted in the word of God. He meditated

on it day and night. Worship involves communication. Worship involves words, for that is how we communicate. Yet many today do not regard preaching as part of worship. They clamour for more music and less preaching.

Praise is also part of worship. The word 'part' is important for some churches now confine worship to singing praises. We are to lift our voices to the Lord. But like praying and speaking it is to be done in an orderly way. We are to sing in praise of God not man. Our hearts are to be directed to the Lord not the human performer.

Purity of worship is important. This act of Jesus 'was a denunciation of worship that was not pure'. It can be seen as fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 3:1-3 – *the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer the Lord an offering in righteousness*. It was a call to 'worship God from the heart, without clamour or distracting influences'.

When Hindus go to the temple they ring the bell as they enter. They take their offering and leave it before the idol. After chanting few words and gesticulating they leave. The observer hears this bell ringing all the time as people come and go with their offering.

Remember the prophets of Baal who leaped about cutting themselves and crying out all day for their god to send fire – what a performance it must have been (1 Kings 18). And then Elijah, what did he do? He quietly called the people of God together, repaired the altar according to the word of the Lord. At the time of the evening sacrifice he prayed, he prayed in words to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel – and God answered his prayer.

I remember a preacher who frowned upon people coming or going while he was speaking. He knew he was speaking the words of God, he had prayed that the people would be attentive to the word of God; he had prayed the God would move by his Spirit among the people. He did not want people distracted in any way. He had a point don't you think. Beware of distractions around you, beware of distractions in your own mind, and beware of distracting others.

In speaking about corporate worship Paul wrote *Let all things be done decently and in order* (1 Corinthians 14:40). And again *Let all things be done for edification* (1 Corinthians 14:26). May that be true of our worship. May each one of us be edified and built up in our faith from coming together to worship the Lord.

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