

Theme: - The cleansing of the Temple.

All four Gospels have Jesus going to Jerusalem and cleansing the temple. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called the Synoptic Gospels, they have the story at the end, where it provokes the chief priest and Scribes to plot to kill Jesus. Whereas John has it at the beginning, and uses the raising of Lazarus, towards the end of his Gospel. which provoked the chief priest and Scribes into plotting against Jesus.

The probable explanation for this significant difference is that the Synoptic Gospel writers were more concerned with history and getting things into reasonable order, whereas John was more concerned with theology. Right at the beginning of John's gospel we read about the glory as of the father's only son chapter 1 verse 14, and here, early in John's Gospel we see his glory as God's Son cleansing the temple.

When you read the four Gospels, it's very clear that there are other differences, both in the events recorded and in the way they are presented. The Gospel of John tells the story in a different way to the writers of the three Synoptic Gospels, the Synoptic Gospels for example have miracles whereas John has signs. John excludes many of the stories the Synoptic writers include, while documenting other aspects and words from Jesus that the Synoptic writers don't mention.

However, while there are differences, the overall message of the four Gospels is the same. Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, or as Jesus preferred, 'the Son of Man', which the Old Testament scriptures pointed to, and who was sent by His Father to redeem humanity and to bring people into a renewed relationship with God through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. The Gospel writers wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, yet they each had their own personality, background, cultural differences, writing styles and audiences, which are reflected within their Gospels. Matthew and John probably wrote from personal recollection because they were there, whereas Mark, and Luke from eyewitness accounts.

With the Holy Spirit's guidance, they wrote their Gospel's of Jesus' life and teachings in a manner that suited their style of writing and would relate to the audience they were writing for. It is for these reasons, and probably more, that there are some differences within the four Gospels, none of which should give us any concern because like all sacred scripture, the ultimate authority is God himself.

Our reading starts, "The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." Now we know from Luke chapter 2 verse 41 that Jesus and his family went up to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover, so Jesus had been to many Passover celebrations in Jerusalem in the past, indeed it was on such an occasion that at the age of 12 that he amazed people in the temple with his knowledge and when he got lost.

Passover was the greatest salvation event in Jewish history, and God also ordered Israel to commemorate this salvation event by observing Passover each year. In which case Jesus knew all about the money changers and sellers of animals and birds, and of their profiteering, way before this event, and like many Jews deplored the corrupt practice but were unable to do anything about it. But this visit by Jesus is different to all previous visits that he may have made, Jesus, through his baptism by John the Baptist had now received his commission from God, and now through the power of the Holy Spirit was able to tell people about the kingdom of heaven, and all teachers will know that a practical demonstration is worth a thousand words.

But why did Jesus take such a risk and cause such chaos and disruption in the temple so early on in his ministry, right in front of the very people who were probably promoting it, and who would turn out to be his worse enemies? Although Jesus had started his ministry at a private wedding in Cana by turning water into wine, a clear demonstration that in turning to Christ all our needs will be met; his first public act was at the temple in Jerusalem where he drove out the animals and overturned the tables of the money changers.

The point about money changers was that it was not lawful to use foreign coins with people's heads, or other images on, which is normal for a coin, so they had to be changed to a temple coin, usually at an extortionate rate, but that wasn't the only scam. The other scam was the usual practice of declaring animals brought in by pilgrims as not being up to standard, whether they were or not, and refusing to use them, and then selling their own animals at an inflated price. And that situation would also have been the experience of most other people as well, so, when Jesus made a whip and drove out the animals and overturned the tables of the money changers there were possibly many other people helping him and very few wanting to stop him, which was probably why he succeeded.

Now this instance at the time may have just been seen as one person getting totally fed up with the situation of being ripped off, but later after Jesus death and resurrection it would have been seen in a different light, it would be seen as an early demonstration that animal sacrifices were no longer required because Jesus' sacrifice had made all future sacrifices unnecessary. Indeed, in Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 Hosea wrote, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

At the end of his cleansing the temple Jesus said, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." Jesus had just made a remarkable statement, he had referred to God as his Father in front of all the Jews gathered there, and nobody picked up on it, not even his disciples. Now while the disciples appeared not to pick up on Jesus calling himself God's Son they did connect his words to Psalm 69 verse 9 which reads, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The author of Psalm 69 is attributed to David and that David was referring to the Messiah who the Jews

were expecting. Therefore, it is clear that the disciples had connected Jesus and the Messiah together, but it isn't clear that they had gone as far as realising that he was the Son of God at that stage.

Then in verse 18 we have the Jews, and for Jews it may well have been the chief priest and the scribes who were asking Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this." This is not the response I would have expected. If I had just caused such chaos here at St Michael's, I would expect the church wardens to at least throw me out and have me arrested, not ask me what authority I had for causing such chaos; so, what was going on. The Jews have a history of prophets who are well known for saying or doing unconventional things, and the Jewish authorities may well have seen the cleansing of the temple as a prophetic act, in which case asking for a sign to confirm his authority for his actions is understandable from their point of view.

But his response is even more challenging because he replied, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." At face value Jesus was challenging these Jewish leaders to destroy their temple and then he would rebuild it again this time in three days, not in the years that they had already spent on building it, which is how they seem to understand him. The Jewish leaders, of course, could never bring themselves to accept this challenge, no sane person would, who would dare to destroy such a great building as a way of testing Jesus to see how he might replace it in three days. The temple is the holy place where God dwells, and they could hardly imagine anyone destroying it, although the Romans will do so in 70 A.D.

As a slight diversion, it was King Herod who decided to rebuild the temple in about 20 BC and in Jesus' time they were still putting finishing touches to it. It was finally finished in about 63 AD just seven years before the Romans completely destroyed it.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't alluding to the stone Temple, Jesus was alluding to himself, his death and resurrection. It was his body that would be the temple marked for destruction which Jesus was eluding to. Even Jesus' own disciples will remain in the dark about this second level of meaning until after the resurrection. At which time all will become clear.

Clearly God was with Jesus protecting him because the Jews didn't take any further action against him. Indeed, in subsequent verses it would seem that Jesus continued to walk freely in Jerusalem and indeed in just five verses down from our reading a Pharisee said of him, "Rabbi we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

In his epistles to the Corinthians, Paul says that our bodies are also temples, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, see 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; and 2 Corinthians 6:16.

Finally, it is Jesus who will become the new temple, the place where people can come to meet with God, and it is here at St Michael's where we make our sacrifice every

Sunday by our worship, and indeed after communion we shall say together,
“Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.”

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