

Sermon 3rd Sunday in Lent 2021

The Reverend Jordan Greatbatch

Back in April of 2008 an incident took place at the Waihopai Spy Station which is situated near Blenheim in the South Island. Three activists one of them including an Auckland Dominican priest from the organisation 'Ploughshares Aotearoa' breached three security fences to enter the base and then used a sickle to deflate the covering over one of the two satellite dishes.

Prime Minister Helen Clarke condemned the attack at the time on the spy base as a "senseless act of criminal vandalism". They waited there until they were arrested and charged with intentional damage and unlawful entry. They were tried in March 2010 where they readily admitted their actions in court but defended it as a "claim of right" to save human lives. The jury agreed and the three activists were acquitted on all charges. One of the protesters said "we broke a law to protect plastic to uphold a law to protect human life."

These three men saw their act of vandalism as a protest against international spying. They used their anger and ideals to damage property.

Now whatever you may think about the act itself, it has striking similarities to our reading from John's Gospel today. Here we have Jesus entering the temple where he finds he finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.

And filled with anger at this sight, he begins to turn over the tables, even grabbing a chord and using it as a whip to get the animals out of the temple!

It would have been quite a scene of chaos and destruction, as tables were turned; animals ran around wildly, this was quite the spectacle.

Jesus was angry, and his response is rather startling.

But why was he angry, what prompted such a response?

If we look at the text we are told that he entered the temple and saw what he deemed to be misuse of the temple. Claiming that they were ‘making his Father’s house a market-place!’ But the challenging thing is, what these people were doing was in fact needed.

They were in service to the temple. The temple tax had to be turned from Roman imaged coins to plain coins in order to pay the temple tax which was required of all good citizens. And because animals had to be sacrificed without any blemish – they were for sale in the temple because many people could not travel with livestock in case they were damaged or injured.

So at first glance, these people are doing nothing out of place or extra ordinary. So what was it that made Jesus so passionate? One place to look is the Old Testament where the life of the temple finds its roots. There is a very short yet extremely interesting passage in the book of Zechariah, chapter 14. It reads “every cooking-pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice.

And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. And you shall flee by the valley of the LORD’s mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come and all the holy ones with him.”

This vivid passage details what some see as the sign of the messiah. The day when he comes and drives out the “traders in the house of the Lord’. It seems the writer of John’s gospel is seeking to connect this passage and many other Old Testament prophecies with Jesus of Nazareth, who he deems to be the messiah, God’s chosen one.

And so it appears that Jesus isn’t just angry at these specific traders or what they are doing, but is displaying in dramatic terms that he is God’s chosen one, that the life of the temple as it now stands will be drastically changed through his life and ministry.

And his life and ministry will be summed up in the act of the Pascal mystery, the Easter event. We see this in his response to those who ask why he is driving out the merchants, and by what authority. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Jesus, as enigmatic as ever, is saying that worship is to be radically changed, that the boundaries and confines of temple life will be radically different through his life, death and resurrection.

They however interpret Jesus' declaration literally, that the temple of which Jesus speaks is the one Jewish temple in which they are standing. We find out, however, that the temple to which Jesus refers is not the temple in Jerusalem but the temple of his body. This reworking of the temple incident is decisive for understanding all of John's Gospel in fact. This is seen in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about worship that takes place a few chapters later (John 4:19-24).

When the women at the well inquires of Jesus where should be the proper place of worship, Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem, his answer, "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." When the blind man "sees" who Jesus is in

John chapter 9, his response is to worship Jesus. Jesus himself is the presence of God.

Therefore this reworking isn't just a mild movement or a stroll in the park, it is divisive, radical, and this is reflected in Jesus' actions in clearing the animals and turning the money changers, this is dramatic stuff.

Jesus firmly positions himself in the Prophetic tradition of the Old Testament – they constantly spoke out against empty ritual and profaning the temple.

And therefore in the tradition of the prophetic, Jesus continues to speak, even to us today. For we recognise that the radical nature of this incident can leave us with an almost queasy feeling. We may want to take up our own chord of whips to rally against injustice, but the disturbing thing is that Jesus could possibly come in and do it to us in our worship community.

For we are a part of an institution, that has often neglected justice. But we also acknowledge that we need the

institution to survive, that the institution has its place and its benefits.

We recognise the strange marriage between the prophetic impulse and the institutions of the church. We realise that we need both to maintain an effective witness in the world, though this is a big challenge as we know!

So as we look to the clearing of the temple today, we recognise that this isn't a call to senseless destruction in the name of God, or anti organised religion, but rather a display of Jesus' authority, and a confirming of his identity as the one whom we worship, as the image of the invisible God.

And so this act is an act of liberation, no longer is our worship confined to one specific place or nation, but to everyone, ordained, lay, poor, and rich. All are free to worship God, and to know God's immense love. This is good news.