

**“OVERTURNING THINGS (Mark 40)”**  
*Mark 11:12-19*

Back on Palm Sunday, Wallace took us through Mark’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He has finally arrived at the place of his destiny as Messiah – not yet at the **time** of his destiny, which is still a few days away, but he’s made it to Jerusalem. After all the preaching and teaching, all the miracles and healings, all the hints about and glimpses of the amazing Kingdom which he has come to inaugurate, here is Jesus, Son of the carpenter from Nazareth, Son of God from all eternity, ready for the final part of the plan. We’ll see how that all unfolds as the weeks go by, but let’s stick with the story as Mark tells it here.

We start with the verse before the one with which our reading started this morning, and an observation by Mark that, I must admit, I’d never really noticed before I started to prepare for this morning. We are so used to concentrating on the way in which Jesus came into Jerusalem and then on the story we are about to consider that we overlook what Mark (and Mark alone) mentions here. At the end of Palm Sunday, after all the fuss has died down and as evening approaches, Jesus goes into the Temple. It’s already late, Mark tells us, so presumably it was all a bit quiet, and Jesus has a good chance to look around at what’s there.

The Temple, you see, was the very heart of Israel’s worship. It was the focus for their religious observance, the place where God was supposed to make his presence felt most powerfully, the symbol of the legacy of centuries of Yahweh worship. It was a hugely prominent building, just in terms of its size and appearance, and it drew pilgrims from far and near. At this time, Passover time, there would have been hundreds, thousands of extra worshippers who had made the trip especially from all over Palestine and beyond.

And it was, as Isaiah prophesied in words that Jesus later quotes, a “*house of prayer for all nations*”. Although it was so closely associated with the worship of the Jewish people, there is no doubt that God’s intention was that this should be a place where all people would feel welcome – even the Gentiles. And a large area of the Temple precincts was known as “the Court of the Gentiles”. At the very heart of the concept of the Kingdom of God, as we have seen many times while reading through this gospel, is the idea of inclusivity – **all** can worship God.

As Jesus looked around on that Sunday evening, he would no doubt have seen the Court of the Gentiles. It was a large courtyard – 300 metres by 450 metres – with colonnades on each side. Most people would pass through this area on the way to worship at the various other places within the Temple complex. And here it had been decided that the various stalls which were necessary to the proper conduct of worship should be situated. Pilgrims who came to worship at the Temple needed sacrifices to offer and it was a whole lot easier to buy a goat or a sheep or a pair of pigeons here than bring them all the way from your home town. So there were lots of little stalls selling the animals for sacrifice to the pilgrims. Any offerings to the Temple and the payment of the Temple taxes had to be made in shekels (or the Tyrian currency that was the nearest thing to shekels at that time). But, as most people came along with Roman currency, there was a need for lots of little bureaux de change. They too were sited in amongst the colonnades.

Now, all these things were perfectly acceptable in the Temple. They were necessary and were sanctioned by the Chief Priests. Unfortunately, it had all got a bit out of hand. The commerce connected with the worship of God had taken over from the worship. We know that the stallholders were doing pretty well out of their trade, charging high prices for animals and taking a big cut for money changing. It’s a pretty fair bet that some of the priests were benefiting, too, at the expense of those who’d come to worship. And as the possibility of profit grew, so the stalls expanded and multiplied. Jesus would have seen the number of stalls and the great mess that was caused by hundreds of animals waiting to be slaughtered. Even

though it was late, there would have been plenty of evidence that this Court of the Gentiles was no longer primarily a place where God-fearing people could pray and worship.

So next day, after a brief interlude on the way into Jerusalem from Bethany, where they'd been spending the night (which we'll look at next time), Jesus and his disciples went straight up to the Temple (v15). Now, in the morning sunshine, the place would have been full of people, noisy, smelly and not very different from the market places in the streets around the city. There would have been worshippers, traders, other folk who were hangers-on, hawkers, beggars and those who were just taking a short cut through the courtyard on their way to other places (v16). This was no longer a place of prayer – it was a place where charlatans, profiteers, fraudsters and other low-lives were making a very decent living right under the eyes of and with the blessing of the Temple authorities. It is the very opposite of what Jesus has come to proclaim. The outsiders – in this case, the Gentiles – are being denied access to the worship of God: the poor are being fleeced in the name of religion: the focus of people's activity has shifted from worship of the living God to making as much as they can from each other.

So Jesus gives vent to his moral indignation. He starts shouting and ranting, quoting the Hebrew Scriptures and making a real stir. He begins to overturn the tables and release the animals. There is chaos as the stalls start to fall down and the sacrifices begin to run around the courtyard. Some scholars have said that this episode cannot have really happened as someone would have stopped Jesus before he got very far, but in all that commotion Jesus could have done a great deal of damage before anyone really realised what was going on or who was responsible. As he ransacks the traders' stalls and yells out verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus reminds people what worshipping God is all about and adds another dramatic demonstration of his Messianic credentials to the growing list. According to the prophet Malachi, the Messiah would be someone who came to purify the Temple.

Now, as we've already said, the provision of animals and the changing of currency were quite legitimate aspects of the life of the Temple. They were sanctioned by the priesthood and given facilities in the Temple where it was most convenient. So what's all the fuss about? Why has Jesus flipped his lid in this way? Well, I've hinted at it in what's been said. Jesus is, I believe, angry at the shift of focus. The Temple, symbolically and actually, was intended to point people towards worship and towards inclusivity. All were welcome to join in the worship of the One True God, even those who had been considered beyond the pale – Gentiles (and others). Now their one place of welcome and safety had been taken over and what had taken over that place had nothing to do with worship, nothing to do with the acknowledgement of God, but everything to do with commerce and secularism.

And in a world which is so geared towards marketing and management, we can so easily do the same. I've often quoted Tony Campolo's observation about Christianity: "*Christianity began as a radical faith and way of life. The Greeks turned it into a philosophical system. The Romans turned it into an institution. The Americans turned it into a business. The British turned it into a tourist attraction.*" But it wasn't only the Americans who turned it into a business. I believe that the people who organise conferences such as Spring Harvest are doing a vital work and their real focus is very much in the right place, but standing in the Skyline Pavilion at Skegness a couple of weeks ago knowing that I was going to preach on this passage today, I was struck by the enormous merchandising operation that was going on – books, CDs, t-shirts, puppets, banners, trinkets, anything you could think of with a cross or a fish on it. And on the way into meetings we were handed not hymn sheets or prayer guides, but invitations to subscribe to Christian magazines or go on Christian holidays. You have a look on the *Ship Of Fools* website in the "Gadgets for God" section and you'll see any number of trinkets and trash with a religious theme that someone somewhere is making a lot of money out of.

Now, again, all those things are, I suppose, legitimate in their way (well, not the "Gadgets for God", then!). But where's the real focus? It's such a temptation and one which we must resist in every way. We have already talked about how we are going to market the new premises here (and it was interesting that there were more people at a meeting to talk about that than there usually are at the church prayer

meeting), but if this whole development turns into an exercise to market buildings and attract lettings income the entire project has lost its point. As a church, we are here at the heart of this city to welcome all the community into the orbit of God's love, not to charge them for the use of the premises. I'm confident that we can resist the temptation, but we need to be aware of it and keep our focus in the right place at all times – to be “*a church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church*”.

And that goes for us as individual Christians, too. Our calling is to worship God and to share his love with the community around us. It's important, as the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* tells us, that we “*fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith*” (*Hebrews 12:2*). He shows us the way. He sets the example. And if he tore a path through the misplaced interest of the Temple traders so that people could once again worship God as he intended, then we too need to rip through the things that have got in the way of our ability to worship God as he wants us to.

The Temple traders didn't come to the Temple to worship God, but to line their pockets and follow their own agendas. Why do you come to church? Why do you call yourself a Christian? What's your motive, your focus? Maybe you don't come to make money – after all, it's difficult to see quite how you might do that here – but have you come so that people can see you, so that you can get your Brownie points or have your status enhanced in some way, so that you can pursue your own agenda? If you have, then Jesus has a few things to overturn in your life.

Just like any other place of Christian worship, this should be a “*place of prayer for all nations*”, a place in which anyone and everyone could come to encounter God. No-one should be excluded, no-one squeezed out. Yet it can so easily become a “*den of robbers*”, a cave of brigands, if everyone here is simply pushing their own point of view, following their own agenda. Think carefully about where your life is focussed and pray that Jesus will not need to overturn too much in your life to bring your focus back to where it should be.

### Questions for discussion

1. What is the significance of the verse quoted from *Isaiah 56:7*? What does it say to you?
2. Why were the chief priests and teachers of the Law so incensed by Jesus' actions?
3. What are the things that we might consider to be the equivalent of the Temple traders' stalls today – in the church? in our own lives?
4. In what ways does Jesus “overturn our stalls” today?
5. How can we ensure that our focus remains in the right place?
6. What have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?