

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 63”

Matthew 21:12-17

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. A couple of weeks ago we looked at the way Matthew describes his arrival on the day we now call Palm Sunday. The Kingly Messiah has come to meet his destiny and rides into the Holy City, feted and cheered by the huge crowds which had gathered for the Festival of Passover. At Passover time, the people's expectations of the arrival of a Messiah are always heightened, so Jesus fits into their ideas very easily. Here is someone who has arrived to bring liberation, a political and military leader who will expel the pagan Roman occupiers and usher in a new period of peace and prosperity for God's chosen people. The crowds' response of laying their cloaks on the ground and waving branches they have cut down from the trees has echoes of the way in which their ancestors welcomed the great liberators Jehu and Judas Maccabeus in centuries before. Surely it's all falling into place.

But Jesus has started to subvert their expectations. He comes into the City of Peace riding on a young donkey, the sign of a person coming in peace and humility. He is not about to pander to their fiercely nationalistic and narrowly political ideas of what the Messiah should be. He has come to usher in God's Kingdom, God's righteous rule over all people, over all creation. This is the beginning of the end for the forces of evil, not the inauguration of yet another earthly dynasty held in place by military might and prospering by self-motivated economics.

And now he has arrived at the Temple. It's probably Monday morning by now (Mark's Gospel tells us he went up the next morning, having had a look around on Sunday evening). And just as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was, in a sense, an acted parable which pointed once again to the meaning and purpose of the Kingdom, so his actions in the Temple also say something very important about what's in store in the Kingdom. Jesus is metaphorically nailing up a sign which says "It cannot be business as usual".

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, in terms of its size and appearance if nothing else, and it drew pilgrims from far and near. At this time, Passover time, there would have been hundreds of thousands of extra worshippers who had made the trip especially from all over Palestine and beyond. As we said last time, there could have been around 2.5 million pilgrims in and around the city at this time.

Jesus and his disciples, like all the other Passover pilgrims, would no doubt have entered the Temple precincts via the Court of the Gentiles. It was a large courtyard – 300 metres by 450 metres – with

colonnades on each side. Most people had to 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 seems that 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. It would have been obvious to any visitor that this Court of the Gentiles was no longer primarily a place where God-fearing people could pray and worship.

In the spring morning sunshine, the place would have been full of people and animals – noisy, smelly and not very different from the market places in the streets around Jerusalem or any other 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. 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, we've already hinted at it. Jesus is, I believe, angry at the shift of focus, the change in priority – and that's what this "acted parable" is really all about. 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. You stand at the edges of any of the big Christian festival or wander round the gift shops of cathedrals and other religious attractions and you'll see the enormous merchandising operation that goes 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 some of the meetings I've been to I've been 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. (Sometimes not always the Christian Church, as it happens. Top of their list of Advent Calendars which have missed the point this year is the Ann Summers Advent Calendar.)

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? Jesus looks at it and says the Kingdom cannot mean business as usual. This isn't what it's all about. There is a need for renewed priorities. A new way of looking at what we do, a new way of looking at the world, a new way of living our lives. And I would suggest there are four things in particular here which should characterise the life of the Kingdom of God as it is

portrayed in the life of our church and, as each of us here is part of that church, in our own lives as well. Let's have a quick look at them together. The Temple, the church, should be ...

1. A PLACE OF PRAYER

As Jesus overturns the tables and sets free the sacrificial animals, he shouts words from the Old Testament, from the words of the very Hebrew prophets who predicted his arrival. In this case it's a couple of lines, one from Isaiah and one from Jeremiah. Both of them are taken from passages where the context is all about God's judgement and about the old being replaced by the new. This Temple, he cried out, should be a "*house of prayer*", but you've turned it into a "*den of robbers*". There's a hint there that Jesus, at last, sees the traders as profiteers and charlatans, or he wouldn't have used that word "*robbers*". Although the word that is translated as "*robbers*" can also – in fact, more often – mean something along the lines of "*nationalistic insurrectionists*". Whichever translation we adopt, it clearly doesn't mean people who've come to pray. Their priorities are completely wrong. They've forgotten what the main purpose of the Temple actually is. It's there as a place of worship, a place of prayer. And, as we shall see in a bit, a place of prayer "*for all nations*" – in Matthew's account Jesus leaves off the last couple of words of the quotation from Isaiah.

All kinds of stuff happens here during the week; all kinds of organisations use it; all kinds of activities run by the church go on. It's great. It's lively. People comment on it. But we must never, ever forget that, despite our wish to reach out to the community, despite the great work that is done by different groups, this is a place where prayer should be the very foundation of all that goes on. If we lose sight of the fact that this is first and foremost a place of worship and witness, rather than a resource we use to make money for the church, then we lost sight of the vision that God has given us for it.

Now I can say that – and say it pretty strongly – because, at the moment I believe we are leaning in the right direction. I know that the priority for Rob and the office staff is just as we have said. And I was mightily encouraged the other evening when someone from an outside group using these facilities said to me that he felt Wade Street Church was, indeed, the spiritual heart of this community – and added that there were far too many churches that were run as businesses rather than as places of worship and welcome. But we must not become complacent and always be alert to the dangers of forgetting what we're about.

And the same goes for our personal lives as well. If you are a follower of Jesus, if you are – as St Paul tells us – a temple of the Holy Spirit, then you need to get your priorities sorted out too. Keep those lines

of communication with God open and in good repair. Don't get side-tracked by the many things that seem to be the priorities of the world around us.

2. A PLACE OF HEALING

Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, *The Message*, does take a few liberties with the text every now and then, but it usually helps to illuminate what's being said. After Jesus has cleared out the traders and money-changers, Peterson writes, "*Now there was room for the blind and crippled to come in.*" Jesus was able to get on and do some of the Kingdom things that the Temple was rightly the place for. People came to him in the Temple and Jesus healed them – he restored their wholeness. He made them complete human beings again. In the world of Jesus' time, anyone who was blind or lame was severely restricted in their ability to provide for themselves and their family and, before the days of the Welfare State, they'd be reduced to begging for help. So Jesus restores their dignity along with their humanity. The Temple is a place where restoration happens.

And that too is at the heart of the Kingdom of God – restoration. God is wanting through his benevolent rule, to restore creation to the state in which he first created it. He wants men and women to be reconciled to each other and, more particularly, to him. Paul refers to it all in *2 Corinthians 5* as "*the ministry of reconciliation*". Jesus' healing of the people in the Temple was in direct contrast to the highlighting of divisions that was going on in that courtyard between the rich and poor, between the Jews and Gentiles, between the leaders and the people. And our behaviour and attitudes within the Church today – and in our personal interrelationships – should also reflect that. This church – and everyone who is a part of it – should mirror the values of the Kingdom rather than the values and attitudes of the wider world and culture around us.

3. A PLACE OF PRAISE

It's sobering to see that what was going on in the Temple is still reflected by the good folk who make up the Church today. As the little children expressed their praise of Jesus in exuberant fashion – by "*shouting in the Temple area*" – the chief priests and teachers of the Law, the upholders of the tradition and guardians of the protocols of the Temple, "*were indignant*". The children, excited like their parents by the celebration of Passover, were running around shouting out the things they'd heard the grown-ups shouting as Jesus rode into the city the day before: "*Hosanna to the Son of David*". Whether they

understood the significance of it or not, they wanted to be involved. But they were being a bit too enthusiastic for some of the leaders.

As the leaders of the people make their protest to Jesus, as if he's encouraging the children in their unwelcome worship, Jesus quotes from *Psalm 8* and says, in effect, that they'll never stop people praising, and they'll never stop children praising. In stark contrast to the gossip and criticism of the leaders, the Temple is ringing with the sounds of praise, just as it was intended to be. What is this church – what are our lives as followers of Jesus Christ – if not a place for praise? What are our priorities Sunday by Sunday as we come along here? Are we here to praise or to chat with our friends? Are we here to worship or hand out rotas? Are we here to offer our thanks to God or to share our gossip? Are we here to learn more of God's amazing grace or to parade our prejudices? What are your priorities when you set out on Sunday morning? This is a place of prayer and praise and that will not, I very much hope, change or we will find ourselves losing the focus that Jesus wants us, expects us to have.

4. A PLACE OF INCLUSION

The Temple precincts were divided up into various areas. The stalls Jesus overturned were in the Court of the Gentiles. If you weren't a Jew that was as far as you could come to worship. Then there was the Court of Women, which was as far as Jewish women could go. Then there was the inner court, where male Jews could go. Then the Sanctuary where the priests could go, and finally the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could go, and then only on very special occasions. So the area in which this story takes place is in the bit where anyone could go to worship – but it was full of commerce and traders making prayer pretty well impossible. Jesus points this out in the words he shouts from the prophets. As we've already noted, though, Matthew misses off the last couple of words of the quotation. Mark includes them: "*a house of prayer for all nations*". The Kingdom of God is an inclusive kingdom. No-one is to be denied the opportunity to be part of it.

Those who were disabled were also barred from getting into the inner courts of the Temple and Jesus here expresses his Father's wish that all should be able to come to him by healing those who came to him. Now they would not be debarred from taking part in the worship of the Temple with their fellow citizens. And, as we've just seen, Jesus was anxious that even the children – those without status, without a voice, without much worth in the society at large – should have their praises heard. The Kingdom of God is an inclusive kingdom. No-one is to be denied the opportunity to be part of it.

I'm sure we would look at such distinctions as those which were part of the Temple regulations and think that they are archaic and unfair. But let's reflect on how easily we make distinctions today, how much our language, our body language, our little conventions and traditions make it difficult for outsiders to become fully a part of the worshipping community here, or in the Church in general. And how much do our own preferences and prejudices work against the priority of a church that really does embrace anyone and everyone?

So what are the priorities which Jesus is setting out for us here as those who are part of the life of the Kingdom of God? At the very heart of all we do together here – and all that we model day by day in our lives elsewhere on the frontline – is **prayer**. That is to be put above commerce, above gain, above the ordinary daily preoccupations of our culture. Prayer and worship should precede and underpin all that we do. We are to seek **healing** and restoration rather than prejudice and separation, not looking at people's appearance or abilities as we join with them in worship. Jesus wants his followers to be full of **praise** for him not indignation or exasperation with each other – particularly not with the children, whose enthusiastic worship of him is an example to us all. And if what we do here, if the way we live our lives as disciples, is to be truly a reflection of the Kingdom of God, then we need to do away with any notion of exclusivity and embrace all who are looking for Jesus: we need to be lovingly **inclusive** of all.

Why were all those people in the Temple that Monday morning? For all kinds of reasons, but only some of those reasons were authentically to do with a response to the God of grace and glory who was supposed to be worshipped there. The people came with all kinds of priorities, some of which were deeply inimical to the values of the Kingdom. Just ask yourself this morning – what are your priorities as you come here to worship today? And ask yourself again tomorrow morning as you set off for work or school or the gym or the shops – just how close are my priorities to the priorities of the Kingdom of God? Whatever habits and attitudes you've slipped into, Jesus is saying that, if you want to follow him, it cannot be business as usual.

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The Temple was to be "*a house of prayer for all nations*". The Kingdom of God is an inclusive kingdom. No-one is to be denied the opportunity to be part of it.

Ask yourself as you come to church – what are your priorities as you come to worship? And ask yourself again on Monday morning as you set off for work or school or the gym or the shops – just how close are my priorities to the priorities of the Kingdom of God? Whatever habits and attitudes you've slipped into, Jesus is saying that, if you want to follow him, it cannot be business as usual.

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?