

The Jerusalem Road

6. The Cleansing of the Temple

Luke 19:41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Matt 21: 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." 12 Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers.'" 14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. 16 "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?" 17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.(NIV)

Text: Is our Temple Clean?

Here we come to another "last in the present series" sermon. We've seen Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem. The journey typified most of His life. What He knew and what the people perceived were two different things and however plainly He said anything to them, it didn't seem to make much difference.

Jesus had been to Jerusalem before - in fact the first thing He did at the beginning of His ministry was throw out the moneychangers. And it was quite a violent matter too. He effectively trashed a market. In the first incident in John, we read that He made up a whip and drove people out.

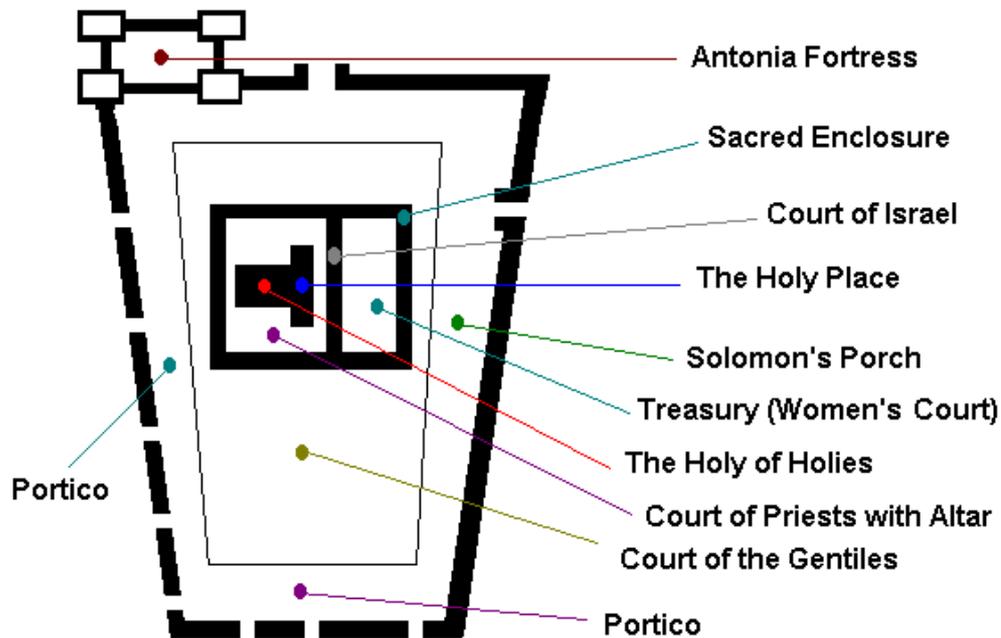
What sort of behaviour is that? How do you expect the Son of God to act. You can almost hear the cries of the Pharisees - sacrilege - this is a sacred building and this man comes in and trashes the place!! Disgusting! Terrible!

Why should the prophet from Nazareth, the man that just earlier they had proclaimed as king act in such an outrageous way?

Let's get a bit of context. The temple Jesus came into was the third on the site. The first was Solomon's glorious temple, prefabricated off site and probably the grandest structure in the world when it was finished. It was destroyed in 586BC by Nebuchadnezzar. However, the returning exiles under Zerubbabel built a replacement which wasn't as grand but actually ushered in a period of great stability spiritually for the Jews. Unfortunately it was destroyed in the 1st century BC.

Herod the Great ruled over the area until 4BC - he is the Herod of the Christmas story. We touched on him in the parable of the pounds last week. He was bad news - a real Saddam Hussein of the 1st Century BC. In order to keep the Jews happy, he decided to rebuild Zerubbabel's temple with a grand structure - a testament to himself. It was started in 20BC and finished in 60AD. It was larger than the temple of Solomon though not nearly so grand.

Around the central temple there was the Court of the Priests, beyond which there was the Court of Israel, beside which there was the Court of the Women. These courts were surrounded by a stone wall that was both high and wide, almost insurmountable, with entrance possible only at the gates. Outside of this huge wall there was a very large assembly area, known as the Court of the Gentiles, bounded on the outside by a colonnade. While it was possible for Jewish men to go into the court of Israel, it was permissible only for Jewish women to go into the Court of the Women, and the Court of the Gentiles was as far as foreigners might go. On the walls surrounding the inner court there has been found the Greek inscription, "Let no foreigner enter inside the barrier and the fence around the sanctuary. Whosoever is caught will be the cause of death following as a penalty on himself."



The Temple Area



Why am I telling you all this? It is to illustrate a fact and that is that the temple already was a place where the glory of God had been diluted for the glory of men. It was a building where the law was carried out, but it's whole fabric spoke another message.

But let's not just blame Herod's bad motives. The court of the Gentiles was a bit of a market. There were two reasons for this. Firstly the currency of the day was the Roman denarius but the Jews would not soil the temple treasury with dodgy pagan coins, so those making an offering into the temple treasury would have to convert the money into shekels. This was done in the Court of the Gentiles - and people were duly ripped off with bad exchange rates. After all, this was not token money like our present coinage - what was in a Jewish or Roman coin had a value because of the metal it contained. So what was it all about - Jewish nationalism, religious tradition. Did it matter what money went into the treasury - the value of a gold coin was the same whoever's head was on it. What should have been a freewill offering was tainted with local politics.

It gets worse. Jews had to bring animals without spot or blemish for sacrifice - the best in their herds. What if they didn't want to or were too lazy to herd it? It would be much easier in a prosperous society like theirs to buy one specially bred at the temple. And that was it. It wasn't a sacrifice that was the best from their flock, that represented a portion of what God had given them. It wasn't giving back something to God in recognition what was provided for them. They just did a duty but purchasing a specially bred pure animal. And of course the High Priest and his family got their cut too.

This was both an expression of Jesus' kingship and His Sonship. He takes up His responsibility to speak out for what the temple should have been. In His first visit to the Temple to do this He specifically mentions His Father. In this one He quotes the same verse again *12 Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 "It is written," he said to them, " My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers.'* What is Jesus quoting from? Turn to Jeremiah 7.

Jer 7:3 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. 4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. 8 But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. 9 " Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"--safe to do all these detestable things? 11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

This passage was written just before the temple of Solomon was destroyed. The people relied on their safety from the Babylonians because they had the Temple. Yet Jeremiah's prophecy revealed what God thought of them - they were acting with injustice to their own people and following false Gods - then they were going to the temple and trying to please God. They were safe. We've given God His portion - we're safe in God's house. *Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.*

Jesus uses the same words. Why? Because He was witnessing the same thing. The temple was all just a sham of outward religion. Inwardly the people were going through the motions, but their lives did not match. What's more God's Son had been revealed to them and they did not recognise Him! Quite the reverse as we see the events of the end of the week.

And that makes God burn with anger. That anger destroyed the nation of Israel to a remnant in 586BC and that anger again destroyed the temple in AD70. I don't find it coincidental that Jesus looks over Jerusalem and weeps before He arrives at the temple. And here they were, repeating the same sins as in the days of Jeremiah. The disobedience was the same and the penalty was the same. In fact, Jesus' prophecy was completed in AD140 where the Romans demolished the whole city and slaughtered the inhabitants after another uprising.

Were Jesus' actions outrageous? No, He acted as you would expect a holy God to. As a king He had a responsibility to protect the integrity of the Jewish faith but this is also the actions of an angry God - it was a warning that the old order was coming to an end because of their sins.

And it stands as a warning to us. It's a warning to us as God's people to abandon double standards - being one thing and then the other to suit our needs and our lifestyles, but trying to keep God happy. We give God what Graham Kendrick once called "my Sundays and the dog-ends of my time" yet what thought are we giving Jesus throughout our lives. He can have Sunday morning and 5 minutes prayer every day, but my time is mine. That's the way many Christians think. And we worship our gods of money, family, respectability, tradition, my way most of the time. Yet how dishonest our faith is if that's the case - God finds that an abomination. He deserves all our worship and all our lives. Jesus doesn't just expose the sham, He breaks it. We have a choice, He either overturns the tables or we allow Him to do the changes peacefully.

We need to come to Him in repentance - and then move on..

But we look at the sin of a whole society - everybody was in the system. They all dishonoured God to a greater or lesser extent. We are part of a Church in decline. We blame all sorts of things for its demise - the permissive society, the liberal theologians and all the rest of it. But I speak as one of middle years who's lived long enough to see the decline in action. The church has shrunk because we didn't do what we should have done. We argued about our theology, the version of the Bible we used, we saw people saved and criticised the evangelist, we didn't pray, we didn't intercede, we were glib, we were self seeking, wanting to build up OUR church, to do worship OUR way and rarely asked if it was GOD'S way. We're to blame. If we lost our children and youth it was because we didn't do something about it. We didn't reach people because we had nothing to say. We were good, sound evangelicals and were an abomination to God. Look at the closed churches if you don't agree with me. And it must stop as we realise that God's judgement is revealed against all abomination. Graham Kendrick's song covers this well:

*O LORD, THE CLOUDS ARE GATHERING,
The fire of judgement burns,
How we have fallen!
O Lord, You stand appalled to see
Your laws of love so scorned,
And lives so broken.*

*Have mercy, Lord,
Forgive us, Lord,
Restore us, Lord,
Revive Your church again.
Let justice flow
Like rivers,
And righteousness like a
Never failing stream*

We need to come to Him in repentance - and then move on

But this is a story about a building; the temple. The sham that Jesus exposed was in the attitudes of the people, but it was reflected in their building. It showed the sin of Herod. One of the first impressions I got of this building when I came and it has stayed with me was the decay. Go upstairs and you will smell the damp, and see the decay. Most of us are new to this church and as we look at the building we see generations of neglect to this building. It was built with the best design and out of the best materials to the glory of God.

Yet it stands as a testimony to things in the past which were less than glorifying to God. Factionalism, narrow attitudes, feuding, dishonouring activities like Freemasonry,

disobedience, lack of vision and all the rest of it. I've had a number of discussions with people on the way in which the sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the third and fourth generations. Many of the things I referred to happened a long time ago and we did not perpetrate the crime - we weren't even here but we are affected by them. If you don't believe me, then look up! But I believe that we must recognise what we have inherited and repent of those things because we live with the consequence of past sins. Repentance means that we don't repeat the sins of the fathers.

It stands as a testimony that we need to move forward and live the vision that God is giving us about Swaffham. I believe the Lord has given us that start and we have already seen many things about this building which brings us joy. What is happening outwardly is a testimony of what is happening inwardly. We are welcoming, zealous for the gospel, open to change, willing to be obedient as a Church. And that bears fruit in new people and a new heart for the gospel. After all, the Church is the people, not the building.

And that is our challenge. We need to make sure our temple is clean. That this house is a house of prayer not a den of robbers. And to clear out those thoughts and attitudes which have dishonoured Christ which still may be hanging around.

We need to come to Him in repentance - and then move on