Lent 3 Jesus in the Temple

Friends of mine who visited York often expected me to take them on a grand tour of the city. We usually started inthe famous medieval shopping centre called "the Shambles". I don't know how it got its name. There are similar places in some of our big cities. They all slaughtered, cut up, and sold meat. York is perhaps the most famous for its 14th century timber-framed shops, which lean in towards each other and are wonderfully preserved. This was the butchering industry and a pretty messy business it would have been, with the slaughtering at the back, and the cutting up at the front. And smelly too!

Keeping that in your mind's eye, switch to a picture of the Temple courtyard in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. It was a very big area. There were probably lines of shops just like the Shambles in York. Or they could have been against the perimeter walls on the four sides. They were all in the butchery business, selling cattle, sheep, lambs, doves, and pigeons for sacrifices in the Temple. It must have been a very noisy, smelly place, not just at festival times, but every day.

It was as much part of everyday living in Jerusalem, as the Shambles was in mediaeval York. Like the Shambles, the Temple Courtyard was always crowded with visitors who were marshalled with the help of the Temple police. So the activities on offer to people were varied and well controlled, ranging from markets related to the services being held in the Temple, to big open-air gatherings with speakers, and freelance oddities pushing their own agendas. Now it was to this open-air market, selling all kinds of slaughtered meat to be used for sacrifices, that Jesus came. We know the story. I'm sure we appreciate the courage of our Lord in throwing out the traders and their goods, overturning the tables of the money changers, and making a stand for true religion, rather than a lot of mumbo jumbo.

Sacrifice had been part of Jewish religion for 2000 years and more. It had lost its original meaning of placating the deity, and had become a racket run by the priests. For years, the prophets had preached that God didn't want sacrifices. He wanted faithful and true hearts. Jesus finally made that clear in turning out the traders.

"My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves." Those words had a sting about them, and stoked fury against Him from the authorities.

I like this story very much. It rings all sorts of bells.  Not least, it reminds me that in the temple courtyard of my life there are things going on which can spoil and ruin my life.

These things have a way of making themselves at home. They take over the way we relate to others. They show a difficult or wayward side of us, which isn't in with what we should be or try to be. What's your courtyard like?

Think of your heart as the temple. The sacred place with all its possibilities for good. The sanctuary of your soul.

Think of your head, your hands, and your feet as the temple courtyard. We do things with these which don't really match up with what our hearts stand for. We can all think wrong things, cruel things, selfish things. We can be very quick to hurt others by what we say. We can do things with our hands and feet which can spoil what we are meant to be. They are all like the traders' stalls and the money changers' tables. They have to be treated radically. We have to do our best to care for the courtyard, so that the inner temple, the sanctuary, can be what God wants it to be.

Our Lord doesn't want us to let these things corrupt our hearts, our inner temple.  Rather He wants us to use them to guard the sacred place and enhance all it stands for.

**Let your heart rule and govern. Let your head, your hands, and your feet be subject to your heart. Try not to let it be the other way round.**

 That's a recipe for these last four weeks of Lent.