

Study Two:

Into the Temple

Opening prayer

Speak to us, gracious God, through the reading of your word, the discussions we shall have, and the prayers that are on our heart, that our faith might grow and this fellowship be strengthened. Amen

Opening discussion

Church buildings are used for a huge variety of events these days, many for raising funds. How do we decide what is, or is not appropriate?



A den of robbers

(Read Matthew 21:12-13)

The Temple at Jerusalem was a centre of pilgrimage and tourism, described by Roman writers as one of the world's most amazing buildings. The actual Temple itself was quite a small building within a larger complex, containing as it did the Holy Place and the inner sanctuary (or Holy of Holies) into which only the High Priest could enter. This was then surrounded by a large open space containing various courtyards.

The first to be entered was the Court of the Gentiles into which anyone could come, but no Gentile go beyond. Then, via the Beautiful Gate were the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites and lastly the Court of the Priests. It was

from here that the High Priest would have access to the inner sanctuary.

In the outer Courts were money changers converting Greek and Roman coins into temple currency, allowing Jews to pay the annual half-shekel temple tax, along with traders offering animals for sacrifice, and all no doubt making a satisfactory profit.

It was possible to buy sacrificial animals cheaper outside the Temple walls, but these would have to be inspected once inside to ensure they were 'without blemish'.

The system was open to abuse, even though there may have been many honest traders operating in what was essentially a

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bustling marketplace filled with the noise of buying, selling and bargaining.

Anyone entering the Court of the Gentiles hoping to find somewhere to worship would find it difficult to find space and quiet.

Jesus' first words are taken from Isaiah 56:7 where the prophet looked forward to a time when the temple would be called a house of prayer. Now with the dawning of the Messianic Age Jesus finds a 'den of robbers', words from Jeremiah 7:11.

The Temple was not fulfilling its God-ordained role as a witness to the nations, instead becoming like the first temple, a symbol of a belief that God would protect his people irrespective of their behaviour or attitude. With echoes of Malachi 3:1 and for those with eyes to see, Jesus inferred a claim to authority over the Holy Place, but the implications of this would not become clear to any but Jesus just yet.

Discussion

- Q: What do you think was Jesus' real motive for his actions within the Temple, and can that speak into our lives today?
- Q: There was a lot going on within the Temple walls. What is the role of the church among the community it is situated within?
- Q: Are you able to find a quietness within your own worship space, and if not how could that be achieved?



From the lips of children

(Read Mathew 21:14-17)

The lame, blind, deaf or otherwise handicapped could enter the Court of the Gentiles, but most authorities prohibited them from offering sacrifices. Jesus cleansed the Temple of those who were abusing it, but not those who had need of it, and by inference the healing that they desired. And as he did so, the atmosphere changed with children's voices shouting out in praise, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'

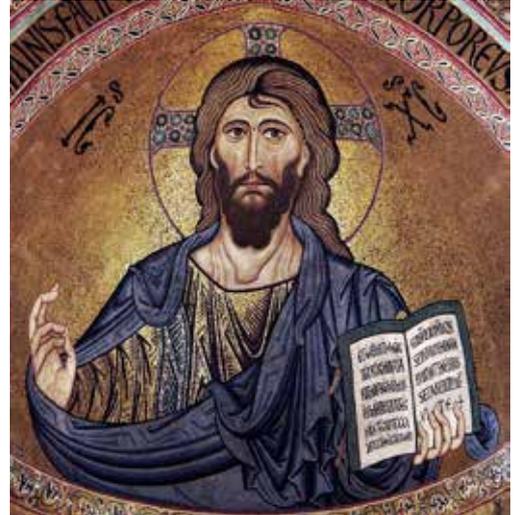
Jesus' response to the criticism directed at the children is to quote Psalm 8:2, which would be familiar to the chief priests and teachers of the law. Matthew is giving his mainly Jewish readers pieces of a jigsaw to enable them to appreciate the bigger picture of who Jesus is, because although the children recognised him, the eyes of the teachers of the law were still clouded.

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.' (Malachi 3:1)

'Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.' (Jeremiah 7:11)

Discussion

- Q: What does this say about Jesus' priorities, and ours?
- Q: In the absence of traders the children's voices can be heard singing. How spiritually perceptive can young children be in your experience?
- Q: Where in your normal place of worship are you most aware of God's presence, and are there any visual aids within that space which help?



A question of authority

(Read Matthew 21:23-27)

After a night in Bethany Jesus was back into the Temple again, and this passage is part of a much longer question-and-answer session with the authorities, alongside parables addressed to a wider audience, demonstrating that Jesus was determined to get his message across even at this late stage in his earthly life.

It is no surprise that the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to know by whose authority he was acting in such a way and where this authority came from, yet their concern in asking was probably less about answering the question of who Jesus was, but rather a desire to stifle and entrap him.

Jesus was not ready to tell them that his authority came from being the Son of God

because that would only hasten his journey to the Cross, so he answers one question with another, a common approach to rabbinic debate.

The Jewish authorities were on the back foot. If they agreed that the ministry of John the Baptist was from God then by inference they had also to accept the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah, as John was a witness to that. If they denied John's ministry, then they would face the anger of the ordinary people who were convinced that his authority came from God.

One of the duties of the Sanhedrin was to distinguish between true and false prophets, and here their response indicated failure.

'I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'
(Matthew 12:6)

'these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'
(Isaiah 56:7)

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Discussion

- Q: Why didn't the authorities simply ask the question that was probably in their minds, namely 'Are you the Messiah?'
- Q: How essential to the success of Jesus' mission was the ministry and mission work of John the Baptist?
- Q: Have you ever had a sense of God's planning in the way your life and faith have developed, and can you share any of these moments with the group?
- Q: Where are the 'dens of robbers' exploiting people today?

Prayers for the week

In the coming days think and pray for the members of your own fellowship, small group or congregation, that they might find space within their daily routine for quiet, contemplation and prayer.

Remember those who are just embarking on a journey of faith, that they might find within this season of Lent and Easter that Jesus is there, hands outstretched to welcome them.

Bring to God your concerns for those who exploit others for financial gain, and for justice to prevail.

Quotes

'These special holidays give rise to various liturgical calendars that suggest we should mark our days not only with the cycles of the moon and seasons, but also with occasions to tell our children the stories of our faith community's past so that this past will have a future, and so that our ancient way and its practices will be rediscovered and renewed every year.'

(Brian D. McLaren, Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices)

'To be sure, it was not Easter Sunday but Holy Saturday, but, the more I reflect on it, the more this seems to be fitting for the nature of our human life: we are still awaiting Easter; we are not yet standing in the full light but walking toward it full of trust.'

'Pope Benedict XVI, Milestones: Memoirs)

'Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot. The reality is so horrible it is not surprising that people should have found it a stumbling block to faith.'

(W.H. Auden)

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