



Sermon

3-March-2024

Christ the True Temple

Leviticus 14:33–53; John 2:13-22

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Our gospel reading today is from John's gospel; it is the account of Jesus cleansing the temple. I want to address two points with this reading.

The first is how does this account relate to the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke which place a similar sounding action on the Tuesday of the week leading up to the crucifixion?

The second is the understanding of Jesus as the new true temple of God.

How do we make sense of John placing the cleansing of the temple very early in Jesus' ministry when the Synoptic gospels place it late? There are two schools of thought.

Some say there was only one event and that John has moved it to the beginning because he is arranging material by theological themes not chronologically. Others say, there are two reports of similar events at different times so we should accept that it happened twice. Professor Leon Morris the New Testament scholar argued strongly for this in his commentary on John as does John Carson.

Something I have been learnt over the years is that if you don't understand something in the New Testament or that God says to you, have a look in the Old Testament – he is often referring back to it.

In reading up on this question, I found an interesting insight from Dr. Joel McDurmon which gives a possible rationale for why there would be two cleansings of the temple.

He relates it to the Old Testament ordinance for dealing with a mould growth in a house. The Hebrew word means 'contagion' or 'affliction.'

McDurmon sees Leviticus as the interpretive key for understanding these accounts. So let's summarise what it tells us.

If a house had a mould growing in it, the householder was to inform a priest who would clear the house. He would inspect it and then again after seven days to see if it had developed. If it had spread, the affected stones were to be torn out, thrown away and replaced. The walls were to be scraped and replastered.

If subsequently, the mould appeared again, the infection was deemed persistent, so then the house was to be condemned and torn down.

Jesus respected the priestly duties. He himself sent people to the priests to be inspected when they were healed when that was required by the Law.

McDurmon advances the idea that Jesus is acting as high priest inspecting his Father's house which had a corruption growing in it. The traders in the temple area were selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging money for the temple tax and preying on the people. Furthermore, they were filling the court of the gentiles with their trade which was only part of the temple complex accessible to gentiles.

One report says there were three markets to serve the temple on the Mount of Olives, but Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, had set up a market in the temple. Rabbinic writings referred to this market as the "Bazaars of the sons of Annas" while Josephus claimed that Annas (the son of the high priest Annas) was very rich and guilty of "despoiling by open violence the common priests of their official revenues."¹

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), pp. 371–372.

So Jesus came, as recorded in John's gospel, and drove out the merchants and money changers, poured out their money and overturned their trading tables. He said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" This was the equivalent of removing the infected stones and casting them out.

Soon afterwards he chose the apostles (new replacement stones) and even called Simon, 'Cephas' (in English, 'rock'). And this is how Peter himself describes believers – as stones being built into the new temple, the body of Christ.

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:5

At the end of his ministry, as reported in the Synoptic gospels, Jesus returned for another inspection of the temple and found the infection was reestablished - so now the building had to be condemned.

Malachi had prophesied that the Messiah would come to the temple in judgement:

Malachi 3:1-4 "See, 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. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

This double visitation with judgement following correlates with Luke's account in 19:41-46, where Jesus approached Jerusalem and wept over it, saying,

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. 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. 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 recognise the time of God's coming to you."

Then he entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be a house of prayer"; but you have made it 'den of robbers!'"

If the two accounts were of the same event, then Luke has Jesus weeping over the coming destruction of Jerusalem including the temple, and then entering it with zeal for purity of his Father's house. If they are two separate events, it makes sense that he would be zealous for purity the first time, but weeping over its coming destruction the second time.

You don't have to accept this resolution of the two accounts – you can say there were two without accepting this explanation or you can say there was one event and John has, for literary reasons, moved it to the beginning of his account because he is grouping events to fit his pattern not chronologically. I find it an interesting and plausible explanation.

Jesus – the new temple of God

Let us turn our attention now, to the strange answer Jesus gave when asked about his authority to cast out the merchants. In the portion of 1st Corinthians we heard, Paul wrote:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.²

Sure enough, the Jewish authority wanted a sign to validate Jesus' actions. That's interesting because the question acknowledged that he was claiming divine authority. Only God is going to back up a miraculous sign. So he offered them a sign, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

He was working at a deeper level than they. They were thinking of the stone temple complex and boggling at the idea that a building which had already taken 46 years to build could be rebuilt by one man in 3 days. However, we are told that he meant his body as the new temple of God.

A temple is where God meets mankind – where heaven and earth meet. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and remained. Jesus, God the Son was filled with God the Holy Spirit. Here was the place to encounter God on earth. Here was the temple.

² 1 Corinthians 1:22-24

There are two different words translated as 'temple' in this passage. Up to this point, the word has been *hieron* meaning the temple precincts. But when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple ..." he used a different word, *naos*, which is specifically the sanctuary, and would be used on the Holy of Holies. When he referred to himself, he used that word for the inner place which is most holy.

Jesus' answer to the question was true but enigmatic. The destruction of the temple and raising it again referred to his death and resurrection. Even the disciples did not understand what he meant until after the resurrection when he had explained so much to them. It is out of that later understanding that Paul and Peter write in their letters of the Church being the body of Christ and the temple made of living stones.

This idea of the true temple – the place where God can be found on earth - developed from the tabernacle (which Moses was to make after the heavenly prototype he had been shown) to the temple, to the Messiah and on to his Church, the body of Christ.

So brothers and sisters, we have a great responsibility as church. We together are a local expression of the body of Christ. It is in our midst that we meet with God. This is not all about God and me, but God and us. That is the very New Testament view: Our Father, love one another, serve one another in love.

If that is what is entrusted to the church, we need to take our membership and involvement very seriously. It is a great responsibility. We not only represent God to the world as priests, but together filled with the Holy Spirit, we are the place people can encounter God. No wonder Paul has such a high view of the Church.

Ephesians 2:19-22 you are no longer foreigners and aliens [from God], but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

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