

Rev Esma Collins-Marks – 07 March 2021

John 2: 13-22

The story of Jesus cleansing the temple with a whip reminds me of the old eastern story about a snake that lived on a path on the way to a famous temple in India. Many people would walk along the path to worship, and the snake would often bite people with his poisonous bite. One time a swami (who is a hindu religious teacher) was on his way to the temple and the snake jumped out to bite him, but before the snake could bite him the swami put the snake into a trance and ordered him to stop biting people. "It is not right to bite people with your poisonous bite," the swami told him. "From now on, you shall not bite anyone."

A few months later the swami was passing that way again, and he noticed the snake lying in the grass beside the path. The snake was all cut and bruised and was in an awful state. "Whatever has happened to you, my friend?" the swami asked. "Since you have put your spell on me," the snake explained, "I have been unable to defend myself. Give me back my bite." "You foolish snake," the swami answered. "I told you not to bite anyone. But I never said that you couldn't hiss!"

In today's gospel reading we see an angry Jesus, and it is rather refreshing, since we are so used to thinking of Jesus as gentle, as being meek and mild as the old hymn describes him. If Jesus did not bite in this passage - he surely hissed, and the question we should ask about this passage is why? Why did Jesus get so angry? What has happened there in the temple to provoke this rather startling reaction of Jesus? It will help us to answer this question if we remember the purpose of temples.

The purpose of Temples around the world no matter what faith or creed has erected them, is to provide a means and a place where people may come into contact with God, and experience his grace and his love. Temples are places where people go to give thanks to God for all that he has done and to ask for forgiveness for their sins; they are places where they go to hear God's word, and receive guidance for their lives.

The Temple in Jerusalem was no different. It was built to be a place where the faithful could go to encounter God. It was built for their sake as a special place for them to go to hear his word and to experience his grace and forgiveness and to reflect upon his love and goodness. The temple represented God's presence, his availability to all who sought him, his love for all who called upon him. Yet something happened to this good place, something happened to turn it into a place where it became difficult to hear God and experience his goodness.

Take one look at the money markets in today's world and it doesn't take much imagination to visualize what ended up happening in the temple courtyard at the time of Jesus. Jesus walks into this environment, this up-to-date full-service Temple, and he sees the people selling the cattle and the sheep and the birds, he sees the money-changers at their counters with their constantly changing rates of exchange. He hears the noise, the shouting, the bargaining, the bragging, the bleating and the cooing, and he smells the sweat and the dung of the nervous animals. He sees and hears and smells all these things that are there for the sake of the salvation of God's people, and he becomes tremendously angry!

And he takes some cord, probably his belt, and he lashes out with it, he flails at the merchants and money changers, tossing over their tables and flinging their coins to the ground. He opens the cages and set the birds free, he runs about, chasing the cattle and the sheep and all their owners from the courtyard, all the while shouting "Get those doves out of here! Don't make my Fathers house a market place."

You know, it sometimes takes a fresh eye to see just what we have done to the Holy Things of God, to those things that are meant to help us meet God. Everything Jesus rejected in the temple was put there – at first - with the best intentions, it was put there to help people who came to the temple to seek God's will for their lives and to thank him for his love.

Yet it was wrong. What had started as a good thing, had become an evil thing. The temple had become a place that exploited the need for salvation, rather than a place that furthered it.

And I wonder if there are still today some things that provoke Jesus to that kind of anger? I wonder if there are some things that have to be driven out of our lives, our churches and our communities, because instead of bringing us closer to God they prevent us from meeting him?

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." No-one understood his words then, but later, after the resurrection, the disciples remembered them, and understood. They understood that Jesus was the temple, that in him they met God and talked to God, and experienced God's love and forgiveness. They remembered how he touched people and spoke to them, how he fed the hungry and gave sight to the blind, how he put truth and justice in their right places, and gave peace and joy to those who came near him.

They remember these things, and they remembered his words, and they looked at his death and resurrection, and they knew that Jesus was the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

The power and presence of God is not found in this book, nor in the rituals and observances of our churches but in an encounter with the living Christ, an encounter we can only have through faith and trust and openness to the Spirit of the one who is revealed in these pages and spoken of in this place.

Let us pray for Christ to clear our hearts as he cleared the temple and ask that he may guide us in God's way. Amen.