

Third Sunday in Lent 2021

Exodus 20: 1 – 17; John 2: 13 – 22

There are six Sundays in Lent, including Palm Sunday, and today is the third of them. So we're just about half way through Lent. In my sermons so far during Lent I've described one aspect of Lenten discipline as walking with Jesus towards the cross at Calvary; of us needing the courage and fortitude in our imaginations to go through with Jesus what he went through on our behalf.

The story of the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is in all four of the Gospels. It would fit into that template of Lenten discipline if we read it from Matthew, Mark or Luke. If you joined this service a couple of weeks ago, you may remember us discussing how Matthew, Mark and Luke and described the synoptic Gospels, because they all look at events through the same eye, as it were. This is a good example. In the synoptic accounts, Jesus cleansing the Temple follows hard on the heels of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The

crowds wave palm branches and shout hosanna because Jesus has arrived, expecting him to lead a revolt. Then he indulges, if you like, in this provocative confrontation with authority, and like watching a slow motion car crash, the course to the cross is set.

And there would be a good sermon in it. The idea of Jesus being a lily-livered meek and mild nice guy is knocked on the head; we see Jesus angry; we see Jesus confronting authority, speaking truth unto power and challenging unjust structures in the society he lived in; and from that we are inspired to engage in mission by challenging unjust structures in the society we live in, remembering that precisely that is one of the Anglican Communion's five marks of mission.

Well, that could be worked up into a good sermon, but it's not the sermon for today, because we haven't read a synoptic version of the story. We've read it from John's Gospel which, as ever, looks at it from a

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completely different point of view. John's Gospel doesn't place the story after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He places it at the outset of Jesus' ministry. And this serves to remind us that we're on a fool's errand if we look at the Gospels as accounts of the life and times of Jesus from which we can construct a time-line of his earthly activity. Scholars have tried and failed, because the Bible is not historical fact: it's the revelation of truth.

The evangelist of the fourth gospel uses material differently, symbolically, theologically, in order to convey the truth the gospel reveals. As well as being in a different position in John, it's also only in John that we get the exchange between Jesus and the religious authorities where he says "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." One of the claims in the evidence offered against Jesus at the account of his trial towards the end of Mark's Gospel is that people had heard him say it, but *we* only hear him say it in John.

And this all shows us that this is symbolic stuff. Jesus is not so much concerned with cleaning up commercial practices within the Temple precincts as with a process of personal purification in readiness for the resurrection.

Part of how we strive for personal purification is how we make our social arrangements; how we structure society. The Old Testament, the reading we've had from Exodus this morning, gives us the Ten Commandments, a set of rules for righteous living. Rules are a bit out of fashion now. We want to encourage people to think for themselves rather than be rule bound. I, certainly, identify myself with that prejudice: I'm a product of my generation.

But whilst we don't want people to be emotionally and intellectually stunted by blindly following rules for rules' sake, we can acknowledge that rules are very useful and helpful. Once we've made our ethical decisions, we can codify them into rules which then

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can operate as shortcuts for the ethical decision making process. We don't need to go round the houses and work out the answer every time we're confronted with a situation because the work has already been done and the answer set down as a rule.

I suspect that if we were each given a piece of a paper and asked to devise a system for community living; and then asked to boil that down to some simple guidelines or a few bullet points; we wouldn't come out with a list that started each sentence with the phrase "Thou shalt not . . ." But, once we'd agreed on some contemporary, user-friendly vocabulary, I suspect we would each come out with something pretty close to the Ten Commandments. It's good stuff. It's served the test of time. And we could do a lot worse than simply following the Ten Commandments.

But as well as purifying our social arrangements, part of Lent is to purify ourselves spiritually. We need to attend to our interior journey towards God. We need

to root out our practices and inclinations that hinder us from feeling God's presence and devote ourselves to prayer and contemplation. We need to prepare ourselves for a new spiritual life that comes with the resurrection. This is the re-birth that comes with baptism and traditionally Lent has been a time of preparation for baptism and Easter the day for it. At the Priory we've usually managed to rustle up someone to be baptised at Easter and all renewed our baptismal vows at the same time.

There's no candidate for baptism this Easter. Whereas we normally baptise between 50 and 60 people each year at the Priory, I've only baptised one in the last 12 months. Things are very different. This year we're not just preparing for new life after the six weeks of Lent, but for new life after more than a year of sojourning through the wilderness of lockdown.

The churchwardens and I are engaged in an administrative process of trying to identify the

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increments by which we can return the Priory to being the active place we feel it should be; and the order in which we can gradually lift restrictions to allow us to be increasingly busy but stay safe and healthy. But as well as making these desperately practical arrangements, there is a Lenten exercise in purification for us all to engage with as a community.

There are four questions we need to ask ourselves:

1. What new things have happened during lockdown that we really want to hang on to?
2. What things have been imposed on us by lockdown that we'll be pleased to see the back of?
3. What are the things we're really excited about re-establishing? And
4. What things have fallen by the wayside during lockdown that really ought to be left lying where they've fallen?

Please ponder those questions.

Amen.