

SERMON

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Let's consider then this reading that Sherlon read a moment ago about Jesus going into the temple and turning the tables. Imagine this: Imagine it's a spring day and you are nearly at the end of your journey. This journey has taken a number of days, but it has been well worth it.

You know it will be. Your heart is racing because this is the first time you have ever been in these beautiful gates. Today for you isn't just about the experience of visiting the temple with the joy of the whole earth, the temple that was 46 years in construction, but today is about being unburdened from the guilt that you've come with for the things that you couldn't quite look yourself in the eye for.

Today is about forgiveness for you, about walking free, about leaving behind there those things on the stone table of sacrifice. The burdens that you have been carrying around for too, too long, and have been getting in the way everywhere, not least as you come before the face of God. So you arrive in Jerusalem and you make your way to the temple. There are hordes of people. It's Passover, maybe there's a million visitors, and you make your way to the temple. You have anticipated this moment for years and years. And it is even more of a full sensory experience than you've expected. You've got your money, which you've saved for months, because you'll need to change your money in order to buy the dove that will be offered up for your sins. You're getting closer. The chatter stops and the singing rises and rises picked up by every voice. The gates are just there in front of you. You're nearly there. But as you step over the threshold into the outer court, your anticipation collides with unexpected adrenaline.

There's shouting, there's a commotion, and there is an intensity with which you could cut a knife. Doves are flapping everywhere. They're free, free from their cages which are lying open on the floor. There are those who were obviously selling them and other animals who are literally running all over the place. There are overturned tables upended everywhere, and men scabbling around on the ground trying to pick up coins. And there in the middle of the outer court is a man, and this man is commanding all of the attention of everybody. He looks angry. He's the only focus of attention. He has one arm raised high to the sky and the other is pointing, and he is letting rip. What on earth? How dare he? Who does he think he is?

We pause for a moment. This is Jesus. We know Jesus. We know him as a friend, as the one who understands and welcomes. We know, though, it's easy to make him a domesticated Jesus, our own personal Jesus. The one who supplements life, who's around to make life better and easier. But this Jesus, this table-turning, angry revolutionary. The one who confronts us and calls us to account, and not just us, but all the communities and groups and institutions that bear his name.

What do we do with this Jesus who comes to turn over the tables, who makes us uncomfortable with his uncompromising words and ways? This Lent, is Jesus free to do this in your life and my life in his Church? Back to Jerusalem. Imagine you're there, and you've been looking forward to this moment for the whole of your life, almost, since you can remember. And you're now devastated. You look around at the scene of devastation. What does Jesus think he's doing? You came with your friends to be unburdened, to be forgiven, but now you can't change your money so you can't buy a sacrifice, because there's nothing there. It's all flown off anyway. And so you're going to leave with the very sin that you came to have forgiven. You will leave burdened. Pause again. What does Jesus think he's doing? You see, this action of Jesus in the temple isn't about bookmarks and CDs and calendars and notepads on sale at the back of a big church or cathedral.

It's not a taste thing. He says he wants these things out of here, but don't they have to be here in order for people to buy them, and change their money in order to be able to be forgiven? If these things aren't here, what is the temple for? He's doing an action which gets at the very heart of the temple and what it is for. This is truly what I think Jesus is doing. It's not just an act of protest or defiance. It's prophetic judgement against the sacrificial system. Away with all this. Going back into Jerusalem. You overhear the exchange, because this is the only thing that anyone is paying any attention to. You can hardly miss it, and you're frozen to the spot. You hear them ask Jesus, "How can you do this? On what authority do you do this? Why should we allow you to do this?" Jesus's answers are outrageous. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it." Of course, we know that he was talking about himself. The one bigger than the temple, the one who did everything that the temple did, where heaven touched earth, where sins are forgiven, where every person can meet with God, in Jesus rather than in a place. And so we realise this, then, action of Jesus isn't to shame or just to call us to account.

It's not even just to show us how much we're found wanting. This is to save us. And why does he want to do this action? Why does he want to save us? Because he himself is the sacrifice that will be offered for our sin. And why does he do this? Because zeal for his house consumes him. Because of his passion for us. Because of his zeal for us. Because of the fervour of his love which consumes him so much, he would not be without you or I, so he comes to us, to all of our constructions and offerings and he turns them over, because only in him have we what we need. Forgiveness, peace, meaning, being right with God and others is only ever found in Jesus.

Any tables that Jesus turns over are for our own good, and he does this because of the fire of his love. And so, then, amidst the disquiet and the disturbance, all the people in Jerusalem that day would have left with their attention and their imagination captured by Jesus. Maybe a few of them make it their intention to find him, to talk with him, and even to follow him. Will you and I do the same?