

Sermon preached at St Edmundsbury Cathedral, 4th March 2018 – Lent 3
Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Imagine the headline. “Man on the rampage in St Edmundsbury Cathedral.” A central attraction in Bury, a landmark, a place of special historical significance, a place of pilgrimage, the centre of a worshipping community, a place of prayer, turned upside-down, furniture thrown around, souvenir shop trashed, stained-glass windows broken. Imagine how horrified people would feel. Even if we don’t go there, it’s *our* cathedral...

I wonder how you would react if that happened here. I wonder what would be the root of your concern – damage to a place of history or works of art, the mess and chaos caused, the disruption to worship...

I wonder what gets in the way of your relationship with God.

Sometimes, when we read the Bible, we find that we know a story so well, we have heard it so often, that by hearing what we’ve always heard we can miss the point. Jesus comes to the temple. It wouldn’t’ve been his first visit: it was usual to come for the main festivals; and certainly we know he’d visited the temple as a child. So he comes to the temple, and in it he finds money-changers and animal-sellers. So he drives them out, he gets rid of the animals and their sellers, and overturns the tables and scatters their coins. The “Cleansing of the Temple”. You may well think, “Quite right too! That’s not how a place of worship should be used.” But I wonder whether we’re so used to knowing the story in that way that we miss something important.

The thing is, we might feel horrified at a place of worship being used in this way, but actually the intention was to facilitate worship. What Jesus witnessed wasn’t out of the ordinary, it was what happened there. He would’ve seen it many times before. The animals there were for sacrifices, as required by God’s laws. They were there because they had been checked out as being pure, so there was no chance of people bringing, even accidentally, an animal that was flawed in any way and thus breaking a law about purity. The money-changers were there because people weren’t allowed to use their usual money in the Temple, they had to change it into special “Temple money”. This was all going on to facilitate worship. The temple was the heart of the Jewish faith, and the centre for worship and music for the nation. It was a place of special historic significance, of pilgrimage, of prayer. It was the centre of national celebration and national mourning. And most important of all, it was the place where God had promised to live in the midst of God’s people. And what Jesus witnessed was the daily “business” of the Temple – enabling people to worship God. So why the fuss?

The placing of this story in John’s gospel is interesting, and sheds some light in order to answer that question. Where the other three gospels all place this story immediately after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, near the end of Jesus’ ministry, John’s gospel places it close to the beginning. Within the preceding few days Jesus has gained his first disciples, and then attended a wedding with them at which he turned water into wine – his first miracle. And this water-into-wine story is significant to today’s reading, not just because it’s his first miracle, or because it demonstrates his power over the elements, or because it demonstrates his compassion at wanting to help his host avoid the potential shame and humiliation of running out of wine, or because it demonstrates that he enjoyed a party – though those things are all important. It’s significant because it reveals the focus of his ministry. The water that was turned into wine wasn’t just any old water, it was in the water jars used for purification rituals. Alongside everything else in that miracle there’s the message that, in this just-beginning ministry of Jesus, God is about to do a new thing. Things are going to change. The old systems of purification were no longer necessary. They’d served their purpose and stopped being helpful, they’d reached the point where they’d become an end in their own right, where people were so concerned about getting them right in order to be pure that they’d forgotten that worshipping God was about more than that. So from now on it wasn’t going to be about the things that were meant to be helpful but which could get in the way of relationship with God. It was going to be about trusting Jesus.

I wonder what are the things, for you, which perhaps used to be helpful in your relationship with God but now have become ends in themselves.

So Jesus begins his ministry with that message: God is doing something new. And then he goes to the Temple. And he finds the Temple going about its usual daily business.

The thing is that what's going on in the temple, like the old systems of purification, has served its purpose. When the people of God were first being established as a people, when they came out of slavery and lived in the Wilderness for forty years learning how to be God's free people, God gave them a rule of life by which to live. A rule of life which would enable them to be different from the tribes around them, which would teach them how to live as God's people, how to be free, how to worship God, how to care for each other, how to live out God's kingdom. It's summarised in the Ten Commandments we heard in our first reading. Put God first, which means not worshipping anything else, not making idols, not misusing God's Name, and keeping God's day special. Treat everyone else honestly, with respect and dignity. It's summarised in those commandments – but it's unpacked in a whole load of other laws which you can read in the Old Testament. And in an effort to make sure people got it right and didn't inadvertently mess up, the Jewish leaders added a whole host more laws, so that there was no room for individual interpretation and individual error. And so, over centuries, the rule of life given by God went from being a scaffold to support people's relationship with God, to a straitjacket which held them prisoner. The myriad of rules had served their purpose and were no longer helpful; they'd become an end in their own right; and so the Temple, instead of facilitating worship, was facilitating rule-keeping. Jesus' message, as he drives out the animals and the money-changers, is that God is doing something new. Or something really old, if you prefer to look at it that way – the "new thing" is to return people to the "original thing" – that they are made for relationship with God, and God longs for that relationship with them.

I wonder what gets in the way of your relationship with God.

Perhaps it is the sense that there are things you ought to be doing, to maintain that relationship with God, and the feelings of guilt that are there because you so often fall short... you don't always have your daily quiet time; you mean to go to Bible study but it never quite works out; you try to do Morning Prayer by yourself each day but it's just so wordy; you're just so busy with family, or work, or church...

Perhaps it is your sense of not being the person other people think you are – when they see a person of God, you see yourself on the inside and know you'll never quite match up...

Perhaps it's how difficult it is to talk about your faith, so that you feel you need to keep quiet about being a Christian because it's not something you could explain...

Perhaps it's your feeling of being second-class when you look at those who get involved in practical stuff like Town Pastors or the Night Shelter or the Food Bank or going on mission, and you know you could never do something like that...

Perhaps it's a sense of not being able to make a connection between what you hear in church, and what happens in the rest of your life...

Perhaps you've been in the church long enough to become disillusioned by it, or hurt, or let down, so that church gets in the way of God...

Perhaps there are bits of your own story, your past, which hold you back, which stop you from being able to trust God in the way you might want...

I wonder what gets in the way of your relationship with God.

Jesus sets out, in today's reading, to purge the Temple of what's getting in the way of relationship with God. The action that he takes is drastic. But such a purging is necessary in order for people to be able to move on. People can't be free while they're still holding on to the things that hold them back. And he's modelling the action we need to take in our own lives – our own personal lives, and our collective life as Church, the people of God. We're in the season of Lent, and Lent is a time for reflection and for making changes. It's a time for reassessing where we're at, with God's help, in order to get rid of what's not needed and address what's holding us back. And because we are Church, none of us is engaged in this process of change alone. It's a journey we travel together and for which we have a collective responsibility.

So I wonder what gets in the way of your relationship with God. Who could you ask to help you with that, so that you can be free to be who God created you to be? And the same question for you as Church: what gets in the way of your relationship with God? What do you need to change, what do you need to purge, together, to be ready to move forward together into the future to which God is calling you?

The answers may not be the answers that we want. Ours is a costly faith: it has at its heart the cross. But, to quote the one-time rector of Holy Island, David Adam: "Without the cross there is no resurrection, without death no newness of life." Jesus came that we might have life in all its fullness; that is God's desire for us. It entails relationship, good relationship, with God. So let's identify and put aside all that gets in the way.