

JOHN 2:13-22 JESUS IN THE TEMPLE MARCH 7, 2021

Phil and I happened to be watching a program last week on Britbox that included a brief history of an ancient castle in Yorkshire, Richmond Castle, first constructed by William the Conqueror back in the 11th C. as a military citadel. Over the centuries the castle at times prospered, at other times was nearly in ruins and had to be rebuilt, and in the 20th Century, it was used to imprison conscientious objectors during WW I. These men left their mark on the castle, literally, with political and religious graffiti carved into the stone. This monumental building had a fascinating and varied history! Yet this building originally constructed for warfare ended up housing men who refused to participate in warfare. It was a reminder of how even the grandest and most ancient of buildings evolve over time, are repurposed, or even are simply demolished. In the case of this castle, that history spanned 1000 years. This kind of change and repurposing and vulnerability would be true of the monumental building which plays such an important role in our Gospel lesson today, the Temple in Jerusalem, and there has been some kind of structure on that site for around 3,000 years. Imagine!

This Temple of Jerusalem was originally built by Solomon in the year of 957 BC. It was built upon the rock where it was believed Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac, prior to God providing a substitute sacrifice of a ram. This First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC., rebuilt under the Persians as the Second Temple in 515 BC, and again plundered and badly damaged in the 1st C. BC by the Romans. Our text today indicates that the structure present in the time of Jesus, the Second Temple, was 46 years in the rebuilding, and we know it to have been large and majestic, still on the same site, and still the center of Hebraic worship, the

place on earth where God most clearly dwelt. Yet this Temple would be completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, about 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Eventually, centuries later, the Islamic Dome of the Rock would be built upon this same spot, chosen for the same connection to Abraham that the Hebrews had cherished, since Moslems share much of that same history with Jews and Christians. Another example of how a powerful and glorious monumental building can evolve, change, be destroyed, rebuilt, and repurposed over time. But, just as we would be loathe to believe, for example, that the Lincoln Memorial or the Statue of Liberty will not always be just as they are now, so the Jews of Jesus' day thought it absurd to suppose that their Temple was in any danger of change or destruction. It was grand and large, and after all, it was where God dwelt.

Now, why were Jesus and the disciples in the Temple at Jerusalem? It wasn't just up the road, like our church is for some of our members; it was several days journey away from where they lived, in Galilee. The setting for this lesson is the annual Passover festival that typically attracted great numbers of religious pilgrims to Jerusalem to the temple. These Passover travelers would come from all over Israel and beyond. When they actually arrived in the Jerusalem temple, they had 2 items on their agenda: they needed to pay a special temple tax for their use of the temple, and they wished to make an animal sacrifice to honor God and prepare themselves for Passover worship. The temple tax had to be paid in local currency, and this was a challenge in an era without credit or debit cards. So travelers had to have their currency exchanged, just as we do if we visit a foreign country and want to have some ready cash. And, since it was difficult and inconvenient to travel with the animal they intended to sacrifice, most pilgrims preferred to buy the animal once they reached their destination

of Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, those ingenious merchants of Jerusalem realized that 2 businesses really flourished during this Passover season: money changing and the sale of animals for sacrifice. They set themselves up in these lucrative seasonal businesses. Proximity, of course, is everything in business. These merchants soon noticed that the closer they set up their business booths to the temple, the more business they got. Eventually, the merchants came into the temple's outer courts to do business. They set up their money exchange stalls and animal pens right there. This was a system that pleased everyone. The pilgrims loved it, because it was so convenient. The merchants loved it, because it was so profitable. The temple authorities loved it, because it made it easier for more people to more quickly pay their temple tax and make their sacrifice and move on. This whole 1st C. system was ideal, and it had become essential to Jerusalem's economy, a mainstay of the status quo. Only *Jesus* thought differently.

Jesus seemed to have felt that the intent of Temple worship was being lost. He seems to have perceived that faith was being used or manipulated to profit others in a variety of ways. And he gets angry, really angry. Shockingly angry, don't you think? He actually makes a whip out of the thongs used to tether the cattle, then he drives the animals out of the temple. He overturns the tables of the money changers. He says, "Take these things out of here! You are turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" This makes everyone present terribly upset, and they demand that he defend his actions. He replies, cryptically, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews understandably scoff at this; their Temple is not going anywhere, has a history dating into antiquity, and can certainly not be rebuilt in 3 days. But, as we are told by the narrator of this Gospel of John, Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. Something His disciples only remembered and understood when they looked back on this

incident after Jesus' death and resurrection. And in about 4 decades, that monumental Temple would in fact be rubble. Attached though we get to impressive buildings, the passage of time has a way of undoing them all.

It's easy for us to get caught up in the chaos of the details of this scene; the cracking of the whip, the panic of the animals, the coins flung onto the ground, people standing around in shock and awe. But particularly within John's Gospel, this whole scene is making a little different point than either the chaos of the moment *or even* the sticky issue of how faith relates to commerce. In *this* Gospel we are being told in no uncertain terms, that the Temple of Jerusalem is not where God ultimately or particularly dwells; God dwells within the Temple that is Jesus—Jesus who *will* die and be raised within 3 days. The Incarnation of the event of Christmas means that God is not housed in a structure, but in Christ. Christ, in a sense, becomes the Temple on legs. This is a radical shift in thinking and eventually shakes that 1st C. world off its foundations.

To extend this metaphor, let's consider how we, as followers of Christ, are described in the New Testament. Most often, we are described as the Body of Christ. There also is the recognition that God's Spirit, Christ, dwells within us. In fact, in 1st Corinthians 6:19, Paul writes, "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Not only is Christ the Temple on legs, but even we are described as a temple for the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. And with the Body of Christ as the primary image for the Church, it could be said that just as Jesus is the Temple on legs, *we* are the Spirit of *Jesus* on legs. So what would that mean?

Well, within the Gospel of John, here is some of what God embodied in Jesus—that Temple on legs—did. He turned water into wine while whooping it up at a village wedding. He overturned the money changer’s tables. He healed many people who were sick. He multiplied loaves and fishes to feed thousands of the hungry. He knelt at the feet of his disciples on the night of the Last Supper and washed their feet. He died on a cross. He rose on Easter morning. After that rising, He walked with two of his disciples on a road to Emmaus and shared a meal of bread and wine with them. He showed His risen body with crucifixion wounds to a doubting Thomas, eliciting a confession of faith: “My Lord and my God!” That’s the kind of things that Christ, embodying God’s presence in the Temple, did.

Let me say plainly that I don’t expect any of us to do *just* as Jesus did. We may be the Body of Christ, but we are *not* the Christ. Still, we certainly see a trajectory for the kinds of activities in which we, as Christ’s Body, should be involved, don’t we? Activities that celebrate the good in life, that embrace the outcast, that bring healing to others, that challenge the status quo if needed. We are part of a collective Body of Christ that can and *does* suffer on behalf of others, that is raised up by God again and again to provide for others and to share meals of bread and wine and to inspire confessions of faith. This text provides for us a direction on how we are to live, on what it means that God is embodied not in *buildings*, but in *Christ*. And that Christ’s Spirit *resides* within *us*. And that directly impacts what our bodies, our *selves*, are up to in this world. As mystic Teresa of Avila once wrote, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses

all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” Amen.