

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at All Saints' church, Nottingham

March 4th 2018 (Lent 3)

Jesus and the traders in the temple, John 2

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' expulsion of the traders in the Temple comes after his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. In St John's gospel, however, it comes immediately after the call of the first disciples and the wedding at Cana. It is part, therefore, of a series of very dramatic events which are presented as inaugurating his ministry. Significantly, however, it also comes at the time of the Passover; Jesus had just gone to Jerusalem to celebrate this feast. Notice too that this is the first time Jesus uses the term 'my Father' for God. This begins to reveal his understanding of his relationship to God the Father, the clear implication being that he sees himself as his Son. It's also significant that in this account of the expulsion of the traders from the Temple, Jesus uses the term 'market', not 'den of thieves', as in the other gospels. This description of how Jesus sees what is going on in the Temple is more radical than the phrase 'den of thieves' would suggest; the implication being that the simple act of money changing in the temple in itself, of selling birds and animals for sacrifice, is shown as being wrong. He is not, therefore, being depicted as challenging the traders' corrupt and extortionate practices, but as challenging the very acts of buying and selling themselves.

The Jews then ask for a sign from Jesus, asking him how he can justify his behaviour, and questioning his authority. Jesus responds by saying that he will 'destroy this temple and raise it up again in three days' The text at this point explains that he was referring to the temple that was his body, not the physical structure of the Temple building. This explains that Jesus was drawing a parallel between the house of God, including the innermost sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, and his own body. The fact that he was comparing a traditional place of sacrifice with his own body is again an indication that he was seeing himself as Son of God, but with the knowledge that being Son of God would entail the sacrifice of his very self, thus giving a mysterious and enigmatic pointer to his ultimate death and resurrection (which nobody would have understood at that time).

Why is this episode placed at the beginning of this gospel, unlike in the others? Was it in fact just for dramatic effect? We tend to think of John's gospel as taking more literary liberties than the others; but we can't actually be absolutely sure which position was 'right', if that's the correct way of putting it. Whatever the case, in the fourth gospel three Passovers are described. The first is this one. The second comes in chapter 6 when Jesus performed the miracle of the feeding of the five

thousand. This is followed by a discourse by Jesus in which he talks about himself as the bread of life, the true bread. He is the one who has come from heaven not to do his own will but the will of his heavenly Father, and anyone who eats the flesh of the Son of Man (Jesus) and drinks his blood shall have eternal life; they will live in Christ and he will live in them.

The third Passover takes place after the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. We see the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, followed by the washing of the feet, and then the Last Supper. At the Last Supper, we hear the long farewell discourses of Jesus; his crucifixion and resurrection follow. Is there anything in the relationship between these three Passovers which are the framework, in time, of Jesus' public ministry? Remember that the Passover was a festival of liberation, commemorating the fact that God saved them from slavery in Egypt and led them, through Moses, to the Promised Land. Let's look at them in turn.

At the first Passover, when Jesus drove out the traders, and said that the Temple had become a market place, was he primarily confronting rogue traders who exploited the poor? Or was the Gospel writer in fact depicting Jesus as saying that his coming as Son of God would mean that sacrifices, with animals and birds bought at the temple, would no longer be necessary? The implication was that Jesus himself was the new Temple; there would therefore no longer be a need for a Temple building in order to make sacrifices to appease or propitiate God, or to make atonement for sins.

The second Passover takes the theme of Jesus' body further. In the context of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus refers to the Old Testament account of God giving the people of ancient Israel the manna in the wilderness, but compares and contrasts this with the spiritual food which he will give to the people. He will do this through his body which was broken on the cross and the shedding of his blood, both of which are re-enacted in the Eucharist, which will supersede the Passover.

The third Passover is when these things all actually happen. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross takes place at this time, making future sacrifices by priests in the Temple unnecessary, as the sins of humanity have been atoned for. At the Last Supper Jesus tells the disciples to take bread and wine not just in memory of him, but to represent his body and blood, thus giving the Church the sacrament of the Eucharist. And of course we mustn't forget that the Passover was a symbol of liberation; liberation originally from Egypt and slavery, for the people of ancient Israel, but now with the Last

Supper being a liberation from the bondage of sin. Sin had kept humanity and God apart, but through Christ's death and resurrection they are now reconciled.

This may all sound rather complex to the modern hearer, but such imagery would have seemed far more understandable to the people of Jesus' time. What emerges, then, from our brief look at the theme of the Passover in the Gospel of St John, is a Christ who uses Passover imagery fully and freely to show people who he is: his direct connection with God the Father/Creator; his being Son of God; a liberator, especially from sin and its consequences; and one who would give us a new way of living, a new covenant with God which was symbolised by the meal which was to supersede the Passover, the Eucharist. So when we ponder on the expulsion of the traders in the Temple, let us see it, now, as part of imagery which has a range of resonances and many layers, all centred on the Passover. It was much more than a dramatic populist gesture designed to confront the authorities and win support from the poor. It was, rather, an integral part of the process whereby Jesus showed people more and more clearly who he was, what he had come to do, and how we can all be part of the new relationship with God that he, and only he, could make possible.