

*Sermon preached by David Walsh at St Alfege, Greenwich
Sunday 19 March 2006 (Lent 3)
Exodus 20: 1 – 17; John 2: 13 - 22*

I God and people's livelihoods

This morning's gospel reading shows us one clear consequence when God meets with people in a new way. People's livelihoods are threatened. People can lose their jobs.

The New Testament relates that St Paul at least twice got into serious trouble because the message of the gospel threatened local businesses: first in Philippi, when his preaching deprived the owners of a slave-girl of the large amounts of money she was making them through fortune-telling (Acts 16:16); and later, in Ephesus, when silversmiths provoked a riot, realising that Paul was threatening their lucrative trade making silver shrines of Artemis, the chief divinity of the city (Acts 19).

Throughout history, when the good news of God in Jesus has begun seriously to affect individuals and communities, people's livelihood has been threatened. In the nineteenth century, people in the slave trade lost their livelihood as a result of abolition; and today Christian charities working throughout the world threaten the livelihood of loan sharks through the setting up of credit unions, take trade away from those who enslave others, and from those who encourage and exploit others' enslavement to addictions of any kind.

But there remain plenty of other people for whose loss of work we should be longing: those who earn their livings from the arms trade, from unnecessary damage to the environment, from unnecessary torture of animals. The good news of liberation through Jesus can be nothing but bad news for people who plan to continue making their living in these ways.

II Inner and outer religion

But why did Jesus try to threaten the livelihood of particular people in the Temple precincts? What were they doing that was so wrong? Some would like to picture Jesus at this moment as rejecting the whole cult of the Temple and of sacrifices, rejecting even the very idea of institutional religion. I'm not convinced the text actually points to that. But I do think the incident points to some powerful lessons about the nature of institutional religion.

Religions appear to need both an inner and an outer side: an emphasis both on the place of the heart, on inner spirituality, but at the same time some formal way of expressing that in public. In the rest of our lives, our friendships and loves need rituals such as giving presents, sharing meals together, the exchange of hugs and kisses, in order to sustain them and to express the strength of the relationship. Something similar is true of

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our relationship of God. Religious rituals are our trysts with God, the places where our relationship is made public, focused and deepened.

But there are two problems with the formal, organised side of any religion, including our own. The first problem is that instead of expressing the underlying reality, they can easily become a substitute for it. By placing emphasis on external actions, it easily becomes open to charges of being empty, even hypocritical. This charge is reflected within scripture itself, which includes a strand highly critical of the Temple and its sacrifices. So the prophet Amos pictures God as saying:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and
grain offerings,
I will not accept them. (Amos 5: 21,22)

So the formality of organised religion makes it possible for a gulf to open up between our outward practice and the reality of our heart.

But there is a second problem with the rituals of organised religions, which is that as the surrounding cultural landscape changes, their meaning and

significance can become lost to subsequent generations. The language of the cult remains static whilst that of the culture changes.

One example of this is how bizarre the practice of sacrifice probably strikes many of us as being. The reasons why sacrifice made sense thousands of years ago to religious people living in completely different societies to us are lost in the mists of time. But we would do well to remember just how bizarre our own religious practices must seem sometimes, even to people in our own culture.

By chance, our first reading today, in instructing the Israelites not to covet their neighbour's ox (Exodus 20: 17), reminds us that oxen were once part of the everyday language of the Israelites, and that when they were required to sacrifice oxen and similar animals, they were being asked to give up something which was close to them, something which they already had. The sacrifice was an obvious expression of their lives, of what mattered to them.

But clearly by the time of Jesus people needed to buy animals to sacrifice in the Temple. The culture had moved on, but the cult had not. And so there was a gap to be bridged between people's everyday lives

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and the language of religious practice. This gap was filled by those who sold the oxen, sheep and pigeons for sacrifice, and by those who changed the money by now used in the outside world for the money still accepted by the Temple authorities. The problem, the scandal, for Jesus, was that they did so at the expense of the worshippers. They exploited the gap between people's everyday lives and the language of religious practice and made it harder, rather than easier to cross.

III Our own lives

But today's gospel reading – especially in John's version – doesn't only have lessons for our formal religious practice. For John takes a story appearing in all the other gospels and has Jesus adding a further layer of interpretation.

If the Temple is the place where God reveals Himself, makes Himself present on earth, then Jesus understands Himself and his own body as the Temple of God. Talk about the Temple is reinterpreted to be about other things elsewhere in the New Testament. St Paul writes to a group of early Christians: 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Cor 3:16)

So if one day, Jesus, instead of visiting the Jerusalem Temple, were to visit us and cast his eye around the Temple of our lives, what would he say?

He may not need to deprive us of our livelihood. But might he have questions about who else we are helping to keep in employment? About what kind of financial transactions are taking place in our precincts?

For if you want a mirror to tell you the state of your spiritual health, I can think of little more telling than your monthly bank statement. This is what God really cares about, the substance of your life, the reality of your everyday decisions. Little else in our lives reveals so clearly our priorities. Do our investments help to fund the arms trade, damage the planet, needlessly harm other living creatures? Do our purchases help to exploit workers in the developing world? Do we hide behind the anonymity of money and the power it gives us, to show no interest in what effects our decisions are having on the other side of the world?

If so, Jesus will surely come one day and overturn the tables in our lives. So why not let Lent be a time to put our houses in order?