

March 8th 2015

Exodus 20: 1-17, John 2: 13-22

A prayer from the Psalm for today. Psalm 19: 14.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

Today we heard God's third covenant and the first one with conditions attached. The tradition is to present the ten words or commands as the only time in which God gives commands directly in order to specify the terms of the covenant. The words are of unrivalled importance. At that time Moses spoke God's law.

None of the Commandments were original to the people – each one had been expressed in one form or another, but this was the first time they had been gathered as a covenant and as Jesus later made clear the commandments were a guideline towards a loving relationship with God, who is love and with our neighbours and ourselves.

I want to focus today on the gospel reading. The cleansing of the Temple is told in each Gospel. Each author or community of authors wanted people to know about this action. The three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke, have the incident near the end of Jesus' life so listeners and readers can better understand why Jesus so annoyed the temple authorities.

In John's Gospel the occasion is near the beginning of his ministry and it may be so placed to tell people early about Jesus crucifixion and in three days, his resurrection.

Have you noticed how Jesus says very little at the beginning of this gospel?

His actions tell of his teaching, rather than words. At Cana in Galilee Jesus provides an amazing quantity of wine for a wedding celebration. Jesus is seen as a bringer of unimaginably extravagant gifts to ordinary people. The disciples respond to these affirmations and signs by increasing their faith in Jesus.

The temple scene shows Jesus taking a very different action. He is at the feast of the Passover, a very holy festival, commemorating the event when Jewish firstborn sons were saved from death before the Exodus.

The sentence 'Jesus went up to Jerusalem' sounded ominous.

The usual population of 50,000 people was thought to swell to 180,000 and local resources were strained. The streets would be in gridlock. The priests would be working overtime. Worshippers were to offer unblemished animals, so stalls were set up in the Kidron Valley so animals would not have to travel far to the temple. There needed to be money exchanged as visitors had coins from many nations and there were temple taxes to pay.

The coinage for the tax was from Tyre, a Phoenician city. It was valued for its high silver content.

Imagine the noise, the smell of animals, the heaps of dung, the clatter of coins, the shouts of the sellers and the exchangers calling out their rates. A combination of the old-style stock exchange and a farmers' stock market all together in the foyer of the place of worship. All this took place in the outer courtyard of the temple in the court of the Gentiles. How could any Gentile worship with all the noise?

Caiaphas, a high priest, had let his friends bring their stalls into the temple to gain advantage for their trading. Already Jesus had made it clear that his mission was to all the world, not to Israel alone.

He drives the animals and their keepers out using a whip, scatters the coins, overturns the tables and shouts at the traders. This is his Father's house; a place of prayer. No one seems to hear his claim of relationship. Coins, perhaps fallen in the manure, are being reclaimed, fought over even and the noise of fleeing cattle, sheep and birds is dominating.

It is clear that no-one stopped him; in fact there would be those who would agree with Jesus. The traders back in the Kidron valley, those who did not like the crowds and the stink, customers who felt cheated and enemies of Caiaphas and the prayerful. Jesus was not anti-temple. He was anti-exploitation. It is the only occasion where Jesus is shown using physical force and he does so to remove the unholy from the house of Gentile worship.

People wondered if what Jesus had done was a sign, a prophecy and an authoritative statement. What do you think?

Perhaps you have issues with the Church or with wider society that move you to action or you wish to support others in theirs. The values of love and grace, of justice and mercy, of redemption and transformation are at the heart of our Christian faith. Where we see injustice, hatred, revenge and inequality we link with Jesus in his determination to act honourably. You may have a particular issue that conflicts with the Gospel values and that you wish to change. To bring light to a dark place is a gift of God.

After you take communion today you are welcome to light a candle to symbolise the issue weighing on your heart and your commitment to action.