

Christ Church, Bath

Lent 3

[Exodus 20.1-17]

[Psalm 19]

[1 Corinthians 1.18-25]

St John 2.13-22

Sung Eucharist

Sunday 3 March 2024

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I don't need to remind you how we are living in dark, uncertain, dangerous and frightening times. Times which seem very far from the Kingdom of God; times when many of the world's leaders (to say nothing of the institutions over which they preside) look like insuperable obstacles to the will of God and the establishment of his Kingdom.

For all Jesus was proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and there were others who were expecting it to come imminently, such people were also aware of the things that still stood in its way. One of the chief obstacles for those Jesus wanted to welcome into God's kingdom, but who appeared to be locked out of it (I'm thinking of the poor, the blind the deaf and the lame) was the temple in Jerusalem. There were rules which specifically excluded these and others. Modern archaeology has even unearthed one. But (we might ask) if Jesus really was the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, shouldn't he have tried to move these obstacles aside peacefully? The violent way we've just read about him clearing out the traders was anything but!

In trying to understand today's gospel extract it's enough for us now to remember that throughout his ministry Christ has his sights set single-mindedly on his goal: it is to do the will of his Father. And his Father's will is for him to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. There are various prophecies scattered through scripture which said that for the Messiah to achieve this goal he would have to first restore the temple and its

proper worship. Many in Israel, not just Jesus but many of the prophets before him, had denounced the Second Temple (rebuilt after the Exiles' return from Babylon). It was illegitimate in their eyes because of the way it was being run.

When Jesus was tried before the Jewish Council on Good Friday we will hear that 'false witness' accused Jesus of saying "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands" (Mk 14⁵²). Listening to St John's account this morning we might wonder whether they really were being false. Far from committing perjury, might they not have been testifying to what St John tells us Jesus had actually said? "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn2¹⁹). But going back to his trial, what does the High Priest say after Jesus continued to remain silent? "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" I've often wondered about this. On the face of it there seems to be no reason for the High Priest's question. But there were people who made a connection between 'temple' and 'Christ's Body' in first century Jewish thinking (I shall return to this in a minute) and this helps us to understand

the High Priest's reasoning. He too knew his scriptures or how some Jews understood them. He was making the same connection Jesus had made. He understood that 'restoring the temple' was one of the things the expected Messiah would do if he was to fulfil the prophecies. It's just that this High Priest didn't think the temple needed restoring. Now we can understand why Jesus breaks his silence. For he now replies "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

Notice in that St John's Gospel this morning we don't hear Jesus saying that he's going to rebuild the temple but he's going to "raise it up". Why 'raise it up'? The answer should be a no-brainer. Raise up, resurrect – aren't they two words for the same thing? And then John adds his own gloss to make it clear. "[h]e was speaking of the temple of his body."

Let's now look at the connection in the mind of Jesus, a connection understood later by others in the early church, linking 'the temple' with the 'body of Christ'. I think most of us here have

heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the middle years of the last century as their name suggests down by the Dead Sea.

The Qumran community which produced the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls was active at the time of Christ and we now have many of their writings. I don't think Christ was ever a member but there are grounds for thinking he was familiar with some of the texts they used. They too thought the Second Temple set-up in Jerusalem was illegitimate. (It's why they separated themselves from it.) In the scroll that we call the Commentary on Isaiah they described themselves as a living temple. Their community council was a (living) holy of holies. Their prayer was incense. They saw themselves as the prophesied new Jerusalem.

Sound familiar? This is almost exactly the sort of language that we find Christians using about themselves in the early years of the church. In I Corinthians St Paul describes the church not only as the Body of Christ but as the temple in which God's Spirit dwells. St Peter in I Peter 5 tells his readers that they are the new temple built of liv-

ing stones, a place where spiritual sacrifices were offered. You will find similar descriptions elsewhere in the New Testament.

Lent is when we are asked to re-focus our Christianity on what is important. We were reminded in the readings last Sunday that this will involve us in taking up our cross if we are to have any hope of being one of Christ's disciples, and that this will involve difficult and painful consequences for us as we do so.

But we were also reminded that the Cross is not the end of it. For last Sunday, just as today, we also hear Christ saying "and after three days rise again."

We are the people who are living in the time "after three days". And as we face the trials and tribulations of these present times, one of the things which will help us navigate our path through them is if we hold fast to our vision of the end-goal: the Kingdom of Heaven, God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." It's the same vision that Christ holds fast to throughout his earthly ministry. He's continually sharing it with his followers. Many of his parables are par-

ables of the Kingdom. And this morning he's demonstrating his commitment to ushering in the Kingdom by taking the first steps in restoring the temple.

The promise of Heaven, and being able to share its life here on earth now, is what went on to motivate the first Christians. It's what attracted new converts to the religion that St Paul and the other apostles were preaching. It's what sustained them through the persecutions that followed. And it's this vision of the Kingdom, and the need to remove everything that stands in its way, which we will sustain us in our Christian living.

