

Morning Worship for Sunday 7 March 2021
from the United Reformed Church in Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt. Bavington

Welcome and Opening Words

The heavens declare the glory of God
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.,
Day after day they pour forth speech
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth
their words to the end of the world.
Psalm 19 1-4a

Hymn: God is here! As we his people

God is here! As we your people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of the Spirit
Into open minds and hearts.

Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold;
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore.

Lord of all, of church and kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the Gospel;
help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive;
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe!

Fred Pratt Green Words © 1979, Stainer & Bell Ltd
Copied under CCLI License 45325

Prayer

Lord, you know our hearts and minds
we don't need fancy words to speak to you
we don't need fine clothes to meet with you.

When we put conditions on how to worship,
when the instruction manual becomes our gospel,
when we put obstacles in the path of those who
would come to you,

forgive us.

Your anger in the temple shows us how much you
care:
that everyone is welcome
that **you** are wherever **we** are.

You are love unlimited, always accessible.
We are grateful that we can turn to you
in the dead of night, from the depths of our lowest
moments,
and know we will find love, understanding, comfort
and acceptance, just as we are.
Thank you.
Amen

Ann Honey (URC Prayer Handbook 2021)

Reading: John 2:13-22

Sermon

I want you to recall a place you have been, which has
been a really special place. A place so special that you
are amazed that you are actually there. A place so
special that you almost fear staying there, because it
seems so hallowed.

I have not been to a lot of sporting stadiums, but I
have been to the Liverpool grounds and Norwich City
grounds, to Twickenham Rugby Stadium – but those
places are hallowed ground for many people.

I wonder what place it is for you that has seemed
really special – almost holy – almost magical?

I can remember going to the Harry Potter studios
when the boys were a little younger, and walking into
the Hall at Hogwarts and being amazed and thinking
“Wow” I'm really here.” That seemed a magical, a
special place to be.

But do you know what spoiled the experience – was
just how much was charged for things. The gift shop
there is so expensive. The restaurant is expensive. The
guide books are expensive. But of course once you in

- you can't go anywhere else to buy things - so you are charged over the odds for a drink or to get food from their restaurants and you always have to exit through the gift shop!

And I guess it's a situation a bit like this in our reading from the gospel today.

What Jesus is so upset about in our reading is how ordinary, every day people, are prevented from worshipping God in the Temple. The Temple practices had been developed in such a way that now the poor were disadvantaged and made it difficult for them to worship God there.

There was in the Temple a practice of changing money, and it is these money changers that Jesus turns the tables over. In the outer courts of the Temple at Jerusalem, in the times of Jesus, you would need to change your money which contained the image of the Roman emperor, for a Temple coin. Because you could not take any other graven image into the Temple with you.

And the people running the Temple, would see this as a great way of making money. When people came and changed their money, then the exchange rate would be weighed in the Temples favour.

This is just one of the ways in which those in power, running the Temple, found of cheating the poor out of their hard earned money.

You can imagine then, that all sorts of other schemes might have been in practice to capitalise on this situation. Imagine bringing your offering to the Temple to be sacrificed. This offering should have been the best of your herd, or flock, it was the best that you could offer before God as an offering. But what would happen quite regularly, I'm sure, is that the Temple officials would reject your offering as not being good enough, and sell you a 'temple approved' animal - at a cost that you no doubt could not afford.

It's a bit like me going to a football ground, I've bought my ticket, turned up at the right time, but before I can go in I have to buy a programme and a hat and scarf to wear during the match. Or perhaps you can imagine turning up at church in the morning for the service, and then having to pay to hire a hymn book, and pay to have communion. You can imagine what our reactions would be to those situations.

This whole list of regulations and requirements had grown so much so it became really quite difficult for the ordinary worshipper to come and enter the Temple and make his offering to God.

But despite all this - once you entered the Temple it would all be worth it - it would be the most uplifting religious experience. You would surely say "wow, I'm really here!"

Just the sheer scale of the place. You would walk up the steps, and through the gates, and then the central Temple, would be dazzling. Covered in gold that would just reflect the daylight sun. Just the size and majesty of the place and you would not hesitate to say that God was in this place.

Because of course for the Jews this was the only place where God was.

When the Jews are wandering around the wilderness with Moses, God instructs them that they must make a tabernacle. An elaborate tent, and there is much said about the fine details of which the tabernacle is made. This tent in the middle of the desert, was what housed the Ark of the covenant, where God resided. God moved around with the people, so that wherever they stopped and set up the tabernacle God was with them. This was the only place where God could be found.

When the Jews had settled, then Jerusalem became the place, where a more grand and elaborate and permanent temple was built, that housed the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of holies. So if people wanted to worship God, then the Temple was the place to be. You might go and see Him at an away game. At some other shrines like Bethel and Gilgal you might worship God, but the Temple was like coming to God's Home Ground.

You can imagine then, just the sheer outrage there would have been at what Jesus did in the Temple. This was God's place, his home turf. If you could be arrested for stepping on the hallowed turf at Anfield, then I'm sure would be no hesitation in arresting anyone who caused such a disturbance on that Hallowed ground in Jerusalem.

And so when Jesus caused such a disturbance then the leaders of the Temple demand. "Show us a sign. Let God speak to say who is in the right here. " They say to Jesus, if what you are doing is in accordance with God's will, then let him show us. And Jesus replies "tear down this temple and in 3 days I will raise it up" That is the sign.

And he doesn't mean that he will rebuild the bricks and stones in their current glory. It has taken 46 years so far to get the Temple to the glory it was in Jesus time. There's no way Jesus meant he could rebuild it in 3 days.

But.....Jesus was talking about his body. He says to the religious leaders who, as we will hear in a few weeks time, will send him to Pilate and Herod to be crucified, Jesus says "tear down this Temple (point to self) and God will rebuild in 3 days "

And this was something new. This was a whole new theology that Jesus introduces. He says God is no longer confined to the Temple, and the Holy of Holies. But he is here, alive and present in the person of Jesus.

John's gospel opens with the words: "and the word became flesh and lived among us" The exact translation from the Greek makes perhaps more sense:
"the word became flesh and tabernacled among us"

Jesus was the new Tabernacle. Jesus was the new tent in which God resided. He was the Temple in which God was housed.

Jesus says "tear down this temple and in three days God will raise it up" That will be the sign to you,.

Jesus doesn't just overturn a few tables in the Temple, or drive out a few sheep.

Jesus overthrows the whole religious system, the whole Theology, the whole basis for Temple worship. This was something new. A complete revolution in thinking.

Has anyone ever told you that your body is a temple. What's your normal response? Yes, old and crumbling and falling in ruins!

We are now Temples, because through the Holy Spirit, God resides within us.

As God's own people, we are the body of Christ, the Temple that has been rebuilt.

Peters letter to the early Christian's reinforces this when he says "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

I guess the question comes today is what kind of state would Jesus find our Temple in. As we consider the society that we have built, and all that is wrong with

the world today - how would Jesus react when he saw the injustices around us.

Would he tear through us with righteous anger, overturning all those things which were wrong with us?

Would he drive out from us the ways in which we have taken his freely given love and used it for our own gain?

Would he overturn in us, the very understanding of our relationship with God, and cause a revolution?

As we continue through Lent, we look to our own lives, and the society of which we are part, and we consider how we can make them ready, for the new life which comes through the death of Jesus on the cross. We consider how we can be made ready to allow God to take up residence in our lives, and in our selves, so that we may glorify him in our worship and in our living.

Hymn: Jesus where'er thy people meet

Jesus, where'er your people meet,
there they behold your mercy seat;
where'er they seek you, you are found,
and ev'ry place is hallowed ground.

For you, within no walls confined,
are dwelling in the humble mind;
such ever bring you where they come,
and going, take you to their home.

Here may we prove the power of prayer
to strengthen faith and sweeten care,
to teach our faint desires to rise,
and bring all heaven before our eyes.

Lord, we are few, but thou are near;
nor short thine arm, nor deaf thine ear;
O rend the heavens, come quickly down,
and make a thousand hearts thine own.

William Cowper

Prayers for ourselves

I want to stay with that image of ourselves as the Temple, the House of God, and to invite Jesus into this house to look around. And just as Jesus clears out the Temple in the passage from John's gospel, we ask ourselves what Jesus would clear out from our lives were he to have a good look round. We are going to use our imaginations to show Jesus around our lives, as we imagine this house and are led through a guided

meditation based on one called "My Heart: Christ's Home" by Robert B. Munger

It begins: "One evening I invited Jesus Christ into my heart. What an entrance he made! It was not a spectacular, emotional thing, but very real. Something happened at the very centre of my life. He came into the darkness of my heart and turned on the light. He built a fire on the hearth and banished the chill. He started the music where there had been silence. He filled the emptiness with His own loving, wonderful fellowship. I have never regretted opening the door to Christ and I never will.

In the joy of the new relationship I said to Jesus Christ, " Lord, I want this heart of mine to be Yours. I want to have You settle down here and be perfectly at home. Everything that I have belongs to you. Let me show you around"

In your imagination show Jesus around your life, just as you might show him around your house. Think about the various areas of your life as you go from room to room. And ask yourself what Jesus would think about what he saw, and ask him to clear out all those things that are not worthy to be in God's house. **"Jesus, I know this room needs to be cleaned up and made over.**

Will you help me make it what it ought to be?"

Think about each room in respect of your life:

The kitchen - your appetites and desires
The patio or garden - your leisure time
The bedroom wardrobe - your secret hangups
The study - your reading material
The garage - your gifts, skills and talents
The lounge room - your relationships

Hymn: God is in his Temple

God is in his temple,
the almighty Father;
round his footstool let us gather;
serve with adoration,
him, the Lord most holy,
who hath mercy on the lowly;
let us raise hymns of praise
for his great salvation:
God is in his temple!

Christ comes to his temple,
we, his word receiving,
are made happy in believing;
now from sin delivered
he has turned our sadness,

our deep gloom to light and gladness;
let us raise hymns of praise,
for our bonds are severed:
Christ comes to his temple.

Come and claim your temple,
gracious Holy Spirit;
in our hearts your home inherit;
make in us your dwelling,
your high work fulfilling,
into ours your will instilling,
till we raise hymns of praise
beyond mortal telling,
in the eternal temple.

William T Matson

Blessing