

Jesus's call to action

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Lent 3 b Ex 20 1-17 Ps 19 1 Cor 1 18-25 Jn 2 13-22

I was given a birthday card some years ago which had a picture of a very muscular looking young man on the front. Its caption reads – 'I know my body's meant to be a temple, but I think of it as more like a well-managed Christian youth-club.'

It's not a card you forget quickly. It echoes a saying in 1 Cor 6.19 where Paul writes – Don't you know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you've received from God? You are not your own. Paul's just been writing about things people who belong to Christian youth clubs probably shouldn't be doing with their bodies. So it's always been a much-discussed verse in those settings. ... But I digress.

I know my body's meant to be a temple. This also echoes the saying we just heard in John's gospel; Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. And of course, it relates to something we say together here every Sunday – We are the body of Christ: His Spirit is with us. So today we have the symbolism of this body-temple image in the Gospel to explore – both its implications for us as individual, living temples of the Holy Spirit since our baptisms, and for us as St John's collectively embodying Christ, whose Spirit is with us.

This has a particular focus in Lent, our cleansing time, which is why we have this story of Jesus cleansing the Temple – and on healing Sunday. How I wish, when I pray for someone's healing from an aggressive disease, that Jesus would knot a cord of ropes and drive the illness out of the temple of their body!

There's so much in all this that only a story can help us to

navigate it. So let's get our Gospel back in front of us. Jesus arrives at the Temple in Jerusalem when Passover is near; the great Jewish festival which happens around the time we Christians celebrate Easter. Like Easter, Passover remembers a sacrifice through which God saves many people from a death that would otherwise have afflicted everyone. But arriving on the Temple mount, the scene confronting Jesus shocks him deeply. It looks like a marketplace. We might get a sense of this shock when we think of the way hot cross buns and Easter eggs appear in our shops almost before the Christmas tinsel comes down.

In the lead-up to Passover, extra stalls had already mushroomed on the Temple plaza. Some stalls catered to the extra demand for animals and birds to sacrifice at Passover. Others catered to pilgrims who needed to pay their annual Temple tax. They had to exchange their common secular money for silver Tyrian half-shekels; the only coins pure enough to be accepted in payment of the Temple tax.

So what provoked Jesus when he came to the Temple is something we're quite used to; the grotesque commercialisation of a sacred festival. But for him, the trade wasn't out in the shops like it is for us. The shops had taken over the Temple plaza itself. Imagine if someone suggested sales of hot cross buns and chocolate rabbits during services in this church as a fundraiser for Lent – imaging vendors marching up and down the aisles crying their wares. How would we react? Not on our watch!

That's how all the trade in the Temple affected Jesus. This was where God dwelt among the people – where people encountered their God; the Holy of Holies. Brazen commerce in the Temple was something. Jesus took very personally; Jesus; the Holy God embodied and living among the people. There was only one possible response; Jesus cleansed the Temple.

The authorities challenged Jesus to justify his actions, 'What sign can you show us for doing this? He replied, Destroy this

temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' They didn't understand his response at all. Taking him literally, they said 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But as John has told us Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body.

There's that body-equals-Temple saying again. It comes alive for us today on this Sunday in Lent and in our prayers for healing. Today, we are called to grasp the connection between John's story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, and the way we, the body of Christ whose Spirit is with us, seek cleansing from all that cuts us off from God. We ask this in a particular way today in our prayers for healing – that Jesus may cleanse us and those we love, that he might heal us of what afflicts and grieves us.

I see Jesus' passionate reaction to the abuse of the Jerusalem Temple today, and I know that he's just as passionate about us too – passionate to cleanse us of what mars his image in us. Jesus is passionate about you and me and all people because we too are created in God's image to be temples of the Holy Spirit like he is.

Jesus is passionate about us as St John's too; how we represent him in this place. His Spirit is with us so we might provide justice and mercy and faith in the world he died for. Jesus sees how vulnerable people and groups have their sacred places and spiritual connections violated by outside interests that seek only wealth and control – and we only have to think as far as Western Australia for a recent example of this. And he calls us as his body to oppose these abuses – to get rid of these abuses. That's what the image of cleansing the Temple says to me.

If any are hindered from approaching God by such grotesque forces, or oppressed or sick, this won't get cleansed just by the well-managed Christian club of my birthday card. Jesus calls us, the Body of Christ who have the Spirit with us, to do what he showed us how to do; his is a call to action. Amen