

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Tuesday of Holy Week 2020

As we noted yesterday, today is known in some traditions as Temple Tuesday, the Tuesday in Holy Week when the church reflects on the story of Christ entering the temple in Jerusalem and driving out those who bought and sold there, overturning the tables of the money-changers. It's a scene often portrayed in art, known as the Cleansing of the Temple, and it is so significant that it appears in all four Gospels. Matthew's account tells it in this way:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer";

but you are making it a den of robbers.'

Matthew 21.12-13

The temple was the centre of everything in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. Above all, it was the place where the people of Israel had been given to understand that God had promised he would live among them. By the first century, the Passover festival had evolved into a celebration that lasted a whole week, turning it from a family ritual to a national pilgrimage centred on Jerusalem. All were encouraged to make the journey to the newly expanded temple which Herod was constructing. There was a temple tax, assessed on every family in order to maintain it. Only temple currency was accepted to pay the temple tax – Roman coins, bearing the image of the

emperor, were not accepted, but conveniently money changers were available around the temple, at a less than generous rate of exchange. Pilgrims often also wished to offer animals for sacrifice at the temple for Passover. The animals had to be without blemish, so – conveniently again – it was possible to buy them on arrival rather than travel with them and risk them becoming blemished along the way.

Into this busy scene, at the busiest time of the year, strode Jesus, denouncing the money changers, the animal sellers and all that they represented – challenging not only the economic basis of the temple cult, but the very cult itself. And, given its place in the story, the implication is that this action of Jesus was one of the events which triggered the authorities' determination to arrest him.

In John's Gospel there is an echo of the prophet Zechariah here, for the writer has Jesus saying: 'Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' Zechariah had written: 'There shall no longer be any traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day'¹ – that is, on the day when the Lord will come to a new and restored Jerusalem. The implication is: the Lord has come, and the traders must go.

The priest-poet Malcolm Guite has written a reflection on this idea:

'When Solomon dedicated the Temple he declared that not even the Heaven of Heavens could contain almighty God, much less this temple made with hands, yet in the Christian tradition God himself still came into

¹ Zechariah 14.21; 14.5.

the temple. He came as a baby, the essence of all light and purity in human flesh, he came as a young boy full of questions, seeking to know his father's will, and today he came in righteous anger to clear away the blasphemous barriers that human power-games try to erect between God and the world he loves. Then finally, by his death on the cross he took away the last barrier in the Temple, and in our hearts, the veil that stood between us and the Holy of Holies, the very presence of God, in us and beyond us.'

Malcolm Guite has also written this poem about the Cleansing of the Temple, from his collection *Sounding the Seasons*:

Come to your Temple here with liberation
And overturn these tables of exchange
Restore in me my lost imagination
Begin in me for good, the pure change.
Come as you came, an infant with your mother,
That innocence may cleanse and claim this ground
Come as you came, a boy who sought his father
With questions asked and certain answers found,
Come as you came this day, a man in anger
Unleash the lash that drives a pathway through
Face down for me the fear the shame the danger
Teach me again to whom my love is due.
Break down in me the barricades of death
And tear the veil in two with your last breath.