

I know today is Palm Sunday and we normally talk about Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem when the disciples and the crowds cried out: **Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord: Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.** (Luke 19:38) No doubt the kids will come down from Treasure Hunters with Palm Branches having heard that very story this morning. This isn't what I want us to focus on today, instead we will look at the events of **Holy Monday**, the day after Palm Sunday.

Luke doesn't give us any indication of the **time frame** between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the **clearing of the temple**. We are simply told that when Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it. Above all Jesus wanted Jerusalem to turn to him and accept him, not out of some narcissistic need to have his ego massaged, but because he wanted the city to know the peace he was offering. Jesus knew what the consequences would be for Jerusalem because of the way in which he would be rejected, and so he wept.

Luke simply moves from this story to Jesus entering the temple. Mark on the other hand tells us that when Jesus entered Jerusalem he went to the temple and looked around, but because it was late he went back to Bethany for the evening. It was the next day, **Holy Monday**, when he returned to the city and onto the temple courts.

When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. (Luke 19:45) Mark tells us that he not only drove out those who were selling but also overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

The temple was an incredibly segregated place. The Gentiles were allowed to worship in the outer courts, women could come slightly further in, men were allowed almost to the heart of the temple and the high priest could go into the holy of holies one day a year.

The marketplace that so infuriated Jesus was probably in the court of the gentiles. The animals being sold were for sacrifice, the money changers were exchanging Roman currency for the temple shekel, the currency God had ordained for the people of Israel to use when making their offerings and paying the temple tax. For a strict Jew, a devout Jew this was a very necessary part of temple life.

So why was Jesus so annoyed? When Jesus said, **it is written, my house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of robbers.**' (Luke 19:46) He was quoting from two passages of Old Testament scripture. Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:9

The passage from Isaiah is all about how the foreigner can worship God, more than that, those from outside of Israel, foreigners, Gentiles; they should never be made to feel as though they are unworthy or inferior. Listen to this portion from Isaiah 56: 3-8

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' And let no eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.'

For this is what the Lord says:

'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better

than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure for ever. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.’ The Sovereign Lord declares – he who gathers the exiles of Israel: ‘I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.’

God had ordained, commanded, promised that there would always be a place for those who loved him within his temple walls. He had said the sacrifices of everyone regardless of age, race, gender or anything else would be acceptable – the only key was being bound to the Lord.

By placing this marketplace in the court of the gentiles, the place where the foreigner, the other nations worshiped the temple authorities were saying, God does not care about you, you are something lesser. It was a breaking of God’s promise to give a name better than sons or daughters.

In the passage from Jeremiah God is accusing of Israel of being unfaithful by worshiping other Gods, by being disobedient, and then, coming to the temple and expecting God to accept their sacrifices. Jeremiah describes this as robbing God, not of treasures but worship.

Jesus was very clearly saying that all this activity in the temple, the effective exclusion of gentile believers from worship, the way in which **very real barriers** had been put up to stop sections of the community worshiping was **robbing God of his glory** – and so Jesus overturned the tables and cleared the temple.

What does our temple look like? What does our church worship look like? When I look around, not just our church but most churches I see the same thing. I see predominantly white people and yet we live in an increasingly racially diverse society. I see predominantly middle-class professionals and yet our church is if not in then on the border of an electoral ward which is ranked in the bottom third in Northern Ireland for poverty and deprivation.

When I look beyond the church, I see a society that has less and less contact with us and they see us as having little or no relevance in the routine of life. Why is that?

Have we set up barriers that make it difficult for people to come across our threshold. Do things like fashion and appearance matter, or the way in which we do things – when we ask people to sit for so long and listen, is that a barrier? What about the time of our service, do we need to have the church open more often for other events to allow others to become familiar with these surroundings? I’m simply asking the question; do we need to do more to break down barriers to make the temple more accessible?

There’s a bigger question in this for us as well – when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ are we putting up barriers? When I was young (which is a long time ago now) the big thing was smoking. If you wanted to be a Christian you had to stop smoking – that was grand for me because I never smoked, but for those who did it was a barrier (maybe it still is). Are there things we are saying to people you must do before you become a Christian?

In effect are we saying that we have to attain to a certain level of righteousness, we have to be good enough before God will accept us? That seems to have been what annoyed Jesus so much in the temple. If you were a good Jew, you could worship – everyone else, well it was hardly the

fault of the temple authorities they weren't born Jewish, after all if they were to get circumcised, when they are more than just a gentile, then they can come to worship?

The whole thrust of Jesus ministry, the whole reasoning behind the covenants God made with his people was that he was reaching down to people who could not rescue themselves and he was lifting them up and rescuing them.

When we talk to people about salvation, we are not talking about individuals having to overcome a series of barriers in order to be accepted by God, we are talking about a God who accepts us as we are and who then takes us on a journey where he removes those barriers by the work he does in our lives.

Folks the good news of Easter, the amazing grace of easter is that Jesus has overturned the tables, he has driven out the money changers, the way to God has been opened for all. The challenge is will we come and find acceptance. Will we as a church do more to remove the social barriers that keep others from seeing and understanding what Jesus has done for each one of us.