

Sunday March 4 Clearing the Temple Again

I feel like a broken record when I say again and again, that reading Scripture, without the use of a good Biblical commentary, is a dangerous thing! The Word of God did not come from the mouth of God to the printed page. Without a good working knowledge of the culture, and the Old Testament, it is very easy to miss the significance of what Jesus said and did. Zachariah 9, God's prophetic word from the Old Testament says this , "Lo, Your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey....". Do you see how important the Old Testament is to last week's New Testament Scripture from Mark 11 when Jesus asked his disciples to, "go into the next village where you will find a donkey. Bring it to me". And the next thing you know, we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey....Palm branches waving, shouts of Hosanna! Imagine what it must have been like, for those who knew the Old Testament Zachariah passage, and then saw this ancient prophecy coming alive before their very eyes!

This week Jeremiah 7, from the Old Testament, is significant when it comes to today's New Testament passage -Mark 12 – the clearing of the temple. Context is essential to a true understanding of Scripture.

Palm Sunday is over! It is Monday, the first day of the week of Holy Week. Jesus and His disciples had traveled from Bethany. They were hungry. Jesus saw a fig tree. It had no figs on its branches. Jesus would have known that it was not the season when a fig tree would be bearing figs. For some reason Jesus curses it. The disciples hear him do that.

Jesus curses a fig tree to permanent bareness for not having figs - even out of season! If we take it literally, Jesus is abusing his divine power. Biblical scholars generally agree, that Mark wants us to take this event symbolically, not literally. This passage is called - Jesus clears the temple. The cursing of the barren fig tree seems distracting from the clearing of the temple story. But there is a purpose here. This reference to the fig tree is set up by Mark against the clearing of the Temple.

The tree was not producing fruit. It was not serving the purpose for which it was created.

Mark points to the temple in the same manner.....the temple was not producing people of God.....serving the purpose for which it was created.

The actions of Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem have often been misread by Christians. Today I want to try to bring some clarity to this well known, dramatic scene.

I want to say a few words about the concept known as Blood Sacrifice.

Raise your hand if you have ever eaten meat.

Not including fish, raise your hand if you have ever killed the animal who's meat you have eaten?

Raise your hand if you have never seen an animal intentionally killed for its meat.

Raise your hand if most of the time, the meat you eat comes cleaned and nicely wrapped in plastic.

Does it surprise you to know, that you and I eat way more meat than those who lived in a time where the meat they ate, was from the animal they killed. There was a time, and still is in some parts of our country today, where animals are killed because those who killed them need to eat them. This is how they feed their families.

In the ancient world, people in the church took Blood Sacrifice as a normal or even supreme form of religious piety – a Holy ritual. The giving of a gift and the sharing of a meal, have been for centuries, the most fundamental ways of creating, maintaining, and restoring relationships.

It followed then, in order to create, maintain, or restore a good relationship with the God, the sacrifice of an animal, and a high quality animal at that, was in order. First, the blood from a fine animal, was poured over the altar. Then, the meat was cooked as a meal for a feast with God. You can see how this would make sense to the people of the ancient world. All of this was done in the Temple! A holy, sacred act.

This was known as a Blood Sacrifice. Often when we think of sacrifice, we think of suffering. “OK I will make a big sacrifice and give up cavier for Lent!” Or, to use sacrifice a different way, not suffering but substitution, one might say, “He hit a sacrifice fly”, meaning he gave up attempting to hit a home run so that the runner on 3rd could get home. But the word sacrifice, also means sacred. Sacred blood. Sacred killing.

In ancient times, the person offering the animal for sacrifice tried to ensure that the animal did not suffer. The killing was done intentionally, swiftly, and

efficiently. Ancient priests were also excellent butchers. The dying animal was never considered to be, a substitution - dying in their place

The sacrifice was intended to be, and was considered to be a sacred act. In Jesus' days, the Jews accepted blood sacrifice as a normal component of divine worship. Jesus' wild actions in the Temple that day, had nothing to do with the rejection of blood sacrifice

So why then did Jesus seem to freak out in the temple....throwing over tables, tossing chairs and chickens wildly into the air? "You are turning this house of prayer into a den of thieves and robbers".

When it comes to the Temple – it is not as straightforward as we might like to think, and just by reading the words from the page, you don't get that. We need a Biblical commentary to guide us.

Were you aware, that Temple was not simply The House of God.

On one hand, Jews from all over the Mediterranean world looked to their homeland and its great temple with pride and affection. They supported it through taxation and pilgrimage. It was their holy place of worship. Jews were willing to die for the integrity of their Temple.

On the other hand, King Herod had massively rebuilt the platform of the temple and added a giant Court of the Gentiles – non-Jews. As part of his building contribution to the temple, Herod had a large golden eagle, the symbol of Rome and its supreme divinity – Jupiter Optimus Maximus- installed on top of one of the gates of the temple wall. It assured Caesar Augustus that the temple was pro-not anti-Roman. So when people saw this large golden eagle mounted on the

temple wall, they were reminded that The Temple was also controlled in part, by the Roman government.

But not everyone was in accord with the government's growing control over the Temple. Two Jewish teachers told their students to remove the great golden eagle from the wall. It was an affront to God's holiness. A number of those Jewish men were executed for having tried to make it clear to one and all that the temple was the earthly home of God – a place of worship - not the home of a pagan Roman god, nor beholden to the Roman government.

And here is where we need to know the Old Testament. In Jeremiah, we learn that God tells Jeremiah to stand in front of the temple, to confront all who might enter. Make sure that they have come to truly worship and then go out into the world to live their lives for God. We do not need Biblical Commentators to tell us that it is the longing of God's heart, for us to know Him and love Him and then go into the world to serve Him. Again and again God makes it abundantly clear in Scripture that if we truly know Him and genuinely love Him, serving Him means taking care of each other.....His children wherever and however they are. Even in ancient times, the message was the same.....the Temple was a holy place to worship the Holy of Holies, that you might go out of that place and serve Him in all of life.

When Jesus went into the Temple and saw the abuse that was taking place there.... poor quality animals sold for sacrifice at inflated prices, money changers charging exorbitant rates of exchange to poor people from other regions. Jesus went wild. Greed and dishonesty were everywhere. The temple had become a 'den of robbers'. The injustice of it all was just too much for Jesus to bear. It was

becoming not only a place where robbery occurred but also where robbers went to find refuge.

Worship was always intended to be a place where God's people could go, to learn what it meant to be a good person....what it meant to be righteous....what it meant to take a stand for justice and a stand against injustice wherever we find it....inside of and outside of the church...where we live and work and recreate. But God knew it often went awry. In ancient times, humans were imperfect. In ancient times, humans made mistakes. In ancient times, people wanted to do the right thing. Sometimes they succeeded. Sometimes they failed.

And God said, "I reject your worship because of your lack of justice". In the OT book of Amos it is written, "I despise your festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. The offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon them.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." In Hosea we find, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Think about that song we often sing in worship, from Micah - "What does the Lord require of you? Justice, kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

And there He goes, in that scene that is so etched in our minds –

Driving out buyers and sellers

Overturning the tables of money changers

Overturning the seats of the dove sellers

It was not wrong for any of them to be there.

Money changers were required for those who assist those pilgrims who had to pay their taxes with approved coinage.

Buying animals and birds on site was essential if the pilgrims were going to be able to secure quality animals for sacrifice.

The issue was not that all of these things were happening in the temple, but rather that they were happening without justice and integrity – without truth and love. People were being taken advantage of.

In communion we say, “Come to this Table, all of you who have tried to follow Jesus, and all of you who have failed. It is Jesus who invites you here.”

Inside and outside of the church, in your public and in your private life, may you take a stand against injustice whenever you find it, and may truth, justice, kindness, mercy, and love reign down upon you. Now and always.

Amen