

Lent 3 John 2:12-22

It was on the Monday
that religion got in the way.

An outsider would have thought
That it was a pet shop's fire sale.
And the outsider, in some ways,
Wouldn't have been far wrong.

Only it wasn't household pets,
it was pigeons that were being purchased.
And it wasn't a fire sale:
It was a rip-off stall in a holy temple
Bartering birds for sacrifice.
And the rice was something that only the rich could afford.
No discount to students, pensioners,
Disabled types or Seniors card holders.

Then he,
the holiest man on earth,
went through the bizarre bazaar
like a bull in a china shop.
So the doves got liberated
and the pigeon sellers got angry.
And the police went crazy
and the poor people clapped like mad,
because he was making a sign
that God was for everybody,
not just those who could afford him.
He turned the tables on Monday ...
The day that religion got in the way.

It's good to hear a familiar reading in different words sometimes, isn't it? We hear it afresh. Religion still gets in the way of faith. This reading is from the Iona Community (Stages on the Way p 88). It would have been meditated on first for the deeper meaning.

'the police went crazy
the poor people clapped like mad,
because he was making a sign that God was for everybody,
not just those who could afford him'. Afford!

Temple tax was 2 days wages and then there were the sacrifices.

The dove was the cheapest animal that the poor people could buy for a sacrifice – and it had to be unblemished, as the law of Moses said so it cost more. But the 'system' said you could not buy it with dirty Roman money so first 'they' changed it for you into acceptable temple coinage – of course there was a commission involved. Most pilgrims, trying to come once a year, were very poor.

Our society has got more sophisticated in its ways to hurt the poor – we only take credit cards or we don't take credit cards, we have a minimum, it's cheaper on-line, buy two for one, it's cheaper – but you live alone and one is enough, and you can tell me your own examples.

Jesus was making a sign that God is for everybody, and access to God's forgiveness is for everyone.

The Jews said to Jesus 'What sign can you give us for doing this?'

Tactic 1 – Distract from the real issue here.

Tactic 2 – Prove yourself before you deserve to challenge us.

Jesus said 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'.

I hope that you know that when you are a Christian, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. That would have been the last thought in these temple officials minds – perhaps they might think 'you've just caused chaos here and now you want to destroy this temple'! It is AD 28. It was destroyed 42 years later.

We know that Jesus is showing them a sign – they would destroy his body and in three days it would be raised up. Only after the resurrection did his disciples remember and understand Jesus' words. In holy Week we will hear how this saying is one of the accusations brought against Jesus at his trial Mk 14:58

John often showed how Jesus uses terms, which, in addition to their obvious meaning appreciated by the audience, possess a metaphorical and higher sense. The Bible continues to fascinate and feed believers with its different levels of meaning – so here he refers to the temple building and the temple of his own body.

Let's briefly consider some other examples of this style.

John 3:34 Nicodemus comes seeking Jesus who says to him 'no-one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above' – or equally means - born again. Nicodemus thinks of flesh birth – Jesus of spiritual birth – In these cases, the misunderstanding provides an opportunity to explain and develop faith. Knowing a deeper significance requires the eyes of faith.

John 4:15 The woman Jesus meets at the well in Samaria discusses thirst and drinking water. Jesus draws her on to consider that he can give her living water that satisfies thirst for God. Then they discuss where one should worship– Jerusalem or Mt Gerizim. Jesus thinks that place is not what is important. One must worship in spirit and truth.

John 6:34 After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds want loaves of bread and Jesus says ' I am the bread of life that endures for eternal life'. It can be exciting when we catch the deeper meaning too.

John 7:35 to depart, 11:11 'to awaken Lazarus who has fallen asleep', 12:34 in a weeks time about the serpent being lifted up. 13:9 the foot washing and service, 13:36, 14:22. These are part of John's wonderful style showing how Jesus can teach us, for we are all at different levels of understanding.

Newer meanings can be added as a worshipping community considers a passage, or as a leader considers a passage.

Returning to our passage for today, in what sense is the phrase 'the body of Christ' used here?

The glorified humanity of Christ fits well with John 1:14 'And the word became flesh and lived among us, as we have seen his glory as of a father's son, full of glory and truth'.

It also may have hints of the way St Paul uses it – the way we use it in the Peace Greeting – 'We are the body of Christ' – the church meaning, where church is the gathered people of God.

Our earthly and spiritual bodies are carrying on the work here, the work that we believe Jesus' earthly body did, and still wants done. 1 Cor Ch 12 explores this concept beautifully.

‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up’. Jesus was raised. Through baptism we symbolically die with him and are raised to new life.

Together we are raised up to follow his way – sharing the Good News of God as revealed to us by Jesus, doing acts of compassion, working for justice and challenging hypocrisy and greed, lifting up the poor and outcast because God is for everyone. Religion shouldn’t get in the way.

Jesus correctly predicted the destruction of the temple – in 70 AD. He anticipated the destruction of its form of worship with animal sacrifices. There are some Jews in Israel who want to see a recovery of this form of worship, but Jesus wanted a new form of worship based on a new covenant and on Jesus – As Vicky raises the cup of wine she says ‘This is my blood of the new covenant shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins’. As I break the bread I say ‘Take eat. This is my body given for you’ we are using the term ‘body’ in several rich and mysterious ways.

I said that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Lent gives us a time to cleanse ourselves – so we are fitter to be that temple, so that the Holy Spirit can work in us more effectively.

Do we need to throw out some habits, overturn some fixed thinking, treat other people on a more equal and fair basis, and make our bodies a house of prayer?

Extra prayer is a Lenten discipline

Our New Testament reading, 1 Cor 1:18 began with

‘For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God’. The same could be said of prayer, that it ‘is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, prayer is the power of God’.

To give you something fresh to encourage your Lenten prayer journey, I read you something old and wise from the book ‘Celtic Daily Prayer’.

I find it good just to let my gaze wander, without any concern for time and without any attempt to force concentration. Gradually one part of the wood catches my attention, and then one tree, and eventually one branch on the tree. My scattered thoughts come to focus on a single experience. And then dive deeper and deeper into that one reality (the universe of a blade of grass). Oftentimes the result is that my attention is absorbed by some small flower or leaf at my feet, which I had not noticed before – and I am at peace!

Thomas H Green, Opening to God

Why is there so little anxiety to get time to pray? Is it want of these solitary hours that not only injures our own growth in grace but makes us such unprofitable members of the church of Christ, and that renders our lives useless.

It is not in society – even Christian society – that the soul grown most rapidly and vigorously. In one single quiet hour of prayer it will often take more progress than in days of company with others. It is in the desert that dew falls freshest and the air is purest. So with the soul. It is when none but God is nigh; when his presence alone, like the desert air in which there in mingled no noxious breath of man, surrounds and pervades the soul; it is then that the eye gets the clearest, simplest view of eternal certainties: it is then that the soul gathers in wondrous refreshment and power and energy.

And so it is also in this way that we become truly useful to others. It is when coming out fresh from communication with God that we go forth to do his work successfully.

Horatius Bonnar, Words to Winners of Souls