

## Jesus breaks the barriers

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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Third Sunday in Lent — 11 March 2012

*John 2:13-22*

*“The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.”*

This incident appears in all four Gospels. In each of them it contains a great deal.

It speaks of the need for each of us, as temples of the Holy Spirit, to be clean from corruption and ungodly influences—of sin in short. And the church likewise.

It reminds us of the importance of right relationships between money and the life of faith.

This story also shows how anger can be used for good—that there is such a thing as righteous anger.

It speaks to us of the Lordship and authority of Jesus, as he threw out those who abused his Father's house.

Today, as part of our Lenten series, I invite you to consider yet another aspect of this story. Last week, Chris talked about habits—overcoming bad habits and learning good ones. I want to explore what the story of the cleansing of the Temple tells us of barriers, walls, obstacles, and the way Jesus breaks them.

First a little bit of history. The first temple, built in Solomon's time, was patterned on the tabernacle or tent of meeting created under Moses during Israel's wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai. At the heart of the tabernacle—and the temples that followed it—was the Holy of Holies, where stood the Ark of the Covenant, the place of the sacred fire, the *Shekinah*, the presence of God. It was approached through the Holy Place, where priests ministered before God. In the surrounding open-air courtyard was the altar of brass on which sacrifices were burnt, and the water for ceremonial washing.

Solomon's temple was destroyed by Babylon around 587 BCE. After the Jews' return from exile in Babylon they built a second temple of similar size. Something vital was missing, however. The Ark of the Covenant was lost.

Nearly 500 years later, Herod didn't tear down this second temple, but completely rebuilt and refurbished it—all the while maintaining the worship and sacrifices. Although the Temple proper was not huge, Herod greatly extended its walls and surrounds. A vast outermost courtyard was added, the Court of the Gentiles, about 450 metres by 300 metres.

A high wall surrounded the sacred area, separating it from the Court of the Gentiles. Warning signs in Greek and Latin forbade entry by any Gentile on penalty of death.

The sacrifices and offerings decreed in the law of Moses were a testimony of God's love for the people. They made it possible for the people to restore and refresh their relationships with God. To go to the temple of God was a solemn duty but also a great joy. Psalm 122.1: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’”

For those of means, a lamb or calf might be sacrificed. For the poor, the law allowed a pair of doves to be wholly acceptable. As well, there was an annual temple offering of a half-shekel for every adult male (Exod 30:11-16).

Only Tirian or Jewish currency was acceptable in the temple, either for the temple offering or to purchase sacrificial animals and birds. The moneychangers exchanged other coins for this currency.

The commentators disagree as to whether and, if so, how much the moneychangers were fleecing the people. The Talmud allowed some profit. But it seems that many of them charged exorbitant commissions.

The law allowed animals and birds to be brought from elsewhere to the Temple for sacrifice, but each had to be perfect and unblemished. Temple inspectors examined the animals and birds and charged fees for the privilege. If a worshipper bought a bird or animal outside the Temple, it would most likely be rejected. That gave the merchants inside the Temple the opportunity to charge exorbitant prices.

It was barefaced extortion at the expense of poor and humble pilgrims, shameless injustice done in the name of religion. It was an unnecessary barrier between God and the children of God. Jesus knew this. He singled out a table or two, and drove out the moneychangers and merchants.

Matthew, Mark and Luke place the cleansing of the Temple near the end of Jesus' public ministry, as an incident that angered the Temple authorities and led them to seek his death. John uses the story differently, placing it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

A theme of John's Gospel is that Jesus includes and transcends key symbols of Jewish faith and practice, making them symbols of his and our relationship with the Father—symbols of the abundant life that his followers can share.

Thus, in this passage, Jesus uses the Temple as a figure of speech for his own body. The Temple is the place where God promised to dwell; yet in Jesus was the place where the Word of God became flesh to dwell among us. Jesus makes the Temple point beyond itself to the living dwelling-place that will be his body, his people, us.

The Temple was an enduring reminder of God's desire to live among God's people. It was holy ground, yet much of it was treated merely as a place of trade and profit. There was so-called worship without reverence. Those profiting from the Temple were, in the words of 2 Timothy, "lovers of themselves, lovers of money . . . holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power."

Jesus' disciples remembered Psalm 69: "Zeal for your house has consumed me." The moneychangers and sacrifice-sellers singly lacked "zeal for God's house." So Jesus drove them out.

How zealous are we for God's house? That is, for the community of God's people, for all of us gathered together? How passionate are we about our worship together? How zealous are we to find God's presence and power in the midst of God's people? Are there obstacles to worship that we need to tackle?

In Mark's rendition of this incident, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56.7: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations."

"You have made it a den of robbers," he said.

God called for the Temple to be a place where all peoples could meet their Creator. The very division of the house of God into an inner section for the Jews and an outer for the "unholy", the Gentiles, frustrated God's purpose now revealed in Jesus. In Ephesians, Paul writes that in his flesh Jesus has made both groups into one and has broken down the hostile dividing wall between Jews and non-Jews.

The Court of the Gentiles was the only place to which non-Jews might go to pray or meditate in the temple. The din and movement made it so that no one could worship; it shut out the guest, the visitor and the stranger from seeking the goodness and mercy of God.

Jesus heard the arguing and fretting over whether the moneychangers were charging a fair exchange. He heard the arguments about prices, disputes about coins that were worn and thin, and the clatter of the market place. And Jesus had seen and heard enough. So he drove them out.

The Temple practices and the conduct of the moneychangers and sacrifice-sellers created barriers:

—human-built barriers of tradition, corruption and irreverence that interfered mercilessly with the desire of the people to worship and make their offerings;

—so-called religious behaviour that made it difficult for the stranger, the visitor, the pilgrim, to seek God in God's appointed place of holiness.

The Temple practices made prayer difficult and stood between worshipers and the closer presence of God, as it was understood at that time. Is there anything in our church life that discourages the stranger in search of God? At St Philip's we do work hard at being welcoming—at connecting people who are disconnected into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. But let's be careful not to ask of people more than the Gospel asks. After Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost, his hearers asked, "What should we do?" Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

That's it! No elaborate rigmarole. That's demanding enough!

As part of our work during Lent, let's pay attention to barriers that sit in our lives between us and God, things that make it hard to live in God's presence and to pray.

Of course, there many possibilities: pride, fear, lack of understanding, unforgiveness, jealousy, hurt, grief and so on and on. Some of these things need repentance, some need healing, many need both. We may need help from a trusted advisor or friend as we deal with some of these. But deal with them we ought, with God's help.

Some obstructions to our fellowship with God can be very concrete and practical, just as they were in Jesus' day. Some could be bad habits, as Chris spoke about last week—unhelpful ways we organise ourselves.

The answer might be as practical as getting a Bible in a good modern translation with big enough print to read comfortably—so that we actually enjoy reading it—or getting a prayer book to help us when we are struggling to find words to pray. Perhaps our giving of money, or the lack of it, is a barrier to worship for some of us.

False humility is a besetting sin of Anglicans that comes between us and our Lord. "Oh, I couldn't possibly ask someone to pray about that." Or: "So many people are worse off than me, let's not make a fuss." Our Heavenly Father is infinite in power and mercy. He longs to care for us.

Psalm 84 says, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God."

How thrilling to meet with God, together and alone.

If something is preventing us, if something is a barrier to us in being with God and God's people, this Lent, let's ask Jesus to break it down, remove it, forgive it and heal it.