

Anniversary Sunday, November 19, 17 Based on Matthew 21. 12-16 Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple

Instead of the readings assigned for today by our lectionary schedule, I've chosen the scriptures from suggestions in our prayer book for a Church's anniversary celebration. And the gospel reading I selected is often known as 'Jesus cleansing the Temple'.

Now, the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' time was a pilgrim destination for Diaspora Jews, and the businesses that surrounded the temple were there for the convenience of those who came to the temple to worship. It puts me a bit in mind of when I was in Italy and Vatican City, and the shops and businesses that catered to the many pilgrims and tourists surrounding the Vatican, as well as almost every other cathedral and basilica we visited. In Jesus' day, the portico around the outside of the temple had various businesses operating within it; like money changers, to change the Roman currency, or currency from other lands into shekels, the Jewish currency, the only currency accepted at the Temple. There were the sellers of animals for sacrifices that were required by Jewish law for use in worship, birds for the poorer folk, larger animals for those with more means. Animals given in sacrifice had to be unblemished, in other words, perfect specimens, as prescribed by Jewish law. It would be hard to travel with an animal or bird and keep it in perfect health. I do suppose these businesses around the temple began as a convenience and courtesy. Worshipers needed shekels and animals for offering sacrifices. And, well, nothing comes free, and convenience has a price, and if there's someone selling something, there's an opportunity to make money. And the officials in the church would have rented out the spaces to the merchants, rather I suppose like renting out a table to a crafter at a bazaar. So the selling of these spaces then, made a profit for the temple; and maybe even a bit on the side for the one in charge of selling the space. And you know how that goes---the more spaces sold, the more profits made, deals get made, palms get greased, pockets get lined, resulting in very lucrative businesses for some—and all in the name of God of course! And I do suppose that over time, the market space and profit margins may well have taken precedence over the true business of the temple. Based on Jesus' righteous anger and comments about the temple becoming a den for thieves, it doesn't sound as if the businesses were really there for the good of the people who came to Temple! And like many ventures that came to pass out of a real desire to be helpful, when greed and avarice take over, the original intent gets lost in the name of profit. The Temple was no longer a place for worshipping God, praising God, teaching and learning about God and the scriptures, a place of sanctity, safety and healing. The Temple was no longer a place to do God's work, but became a front for profiteering on the backs of those less advantaged; in effect, legalized robbery. No wonder Jesus was affronted and righteously angry!

I thought this an interesting reading for an Anniversary Sunday, day when we especially give thanks for God's past faithfulness to this community as well as all the faithful believers who've attended here in years past. These are challenging times for many mainline churches, and this church is at a very pivotal moment in its history. The past few decades have seen rapid declines in attendance – for many reasons. The present reality is changing, the future uncertain. But anniversaries are also a really good time to look forward, to consider the future, consider the direction we're going, what roles each of us have on the go-forward. Yes, God has been incredibly faithful to this community of believers, however, have we been faithful in our mission and ministry to God? Are we actually living out our mandate—our mission and our vision as a Christian community? Or have we lost our way? Here's a quote, one that if you follow the parish facebook page, you've seen posted before: "When the preferences of the church membership become more important than their passion for the Gospel, then the church is dying."¹ It's hard to hear, but give it some thought. What do we really spend more time thinking and talking about? What we want for our church, or what Jesus wants for his church? It is a symptom of many of our more challenged parishes—and not just Anglican ones!

¹ Thom S. Rainer via Facebook

What is the purpose of the church in today's world? And if we're honest, we, like many other churches, have kind of lost our way. We've lost sight of the bigger picture. If I asked you just what is church really for, what would you say?

Here's an oft quoted phrase among clergy that I'd like to share with you: The Church is the only organisation that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.'² That takes a minute or two to sink in!

This was "written by (William Temple) ... an outstanding priest, who would go on to become Bishop of Durham, Archbishop of York, and from 1942 until his untimely death in 1944, served as Archbishop of Canterbury. (He had many accomplishments,) but amongst his greatest were his presidency of the World Council of Churches ... he was instrumental in setting it up, and his championing of the poor - later being recognised by the (British) labour party for preparing the ground for (their) National Health service and welfare support. His most famous book was 'Christianity and Social Order'."³

'The Church is the only organisation that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.' And when we truly consider the ramifications of that statement, it means we need to be much more outwardly focused in our thinking.

Bishop Linda, is guiding us all, across the Diocese, to bring us back and closer to our Christian calling and how each congregation can live out their calling as followers of Christ, in their communities, and in their context. Clergy has had training; we've been given tools and resources, one of which is the Mission and Ministry Plan. Every church, parish or regional ministry is to do one, and it's based on the Five Marks of Mission, and these plans must be presented and passed by the members of vestry at each church's annual vestry meeting. These five Marks of Mission are a framework used to describe and encourage ministry throughout the worldwide Anglican Communion. We've talked about the Five Marks before, but a refresher is good.

- **To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom**—the dreaded 'E' Word—evangelism, sharing our faith with others, helping to bring them to faith in God's love in Christ.
- **To teach, baptize and nurture new believers**--once we have come to believe, we need to learn how our faith actually makes a difference in our lives as Christians, and to learn to have a deeper, more meaningful and loving relation with God, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit.
- **To respond to human need by loving service** – how do we reach out to those in need and put our faith into action?
- **To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation** – this sounds a bit political, doesn't it? And, it is actually. Jesus' actions were political, he continually challenged those in power, threw people out of the temple, overturned tables and everything! That doesn't mean we all run for political office, but how can we, in our own little way, make a difference?
- **To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth**—this is ecology, living as if the God's incredible creation isn't ours to exploit, but to care for instead. Are we going to stop global warming? No, but let's live with the awareness that all creation is a gift, given to us by God for our use, and we have responsibility for its integrity and sustainability.

So that's a lot to put into a plan, and we have to be realistic—what we can do, in this faith community, with the resources we have available to us. The plan helps us to live our faith in ways that make sense for us, in our time and

² <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/william-temple/who-was-william-temple.html> Accessed Nov. 15, 17

³ Ibid

space, in this community, using the resources that we have—knowing—believing-- that when we do God's work, God provides!

At Trinity, as many of you know, one of the stipulations made by the Bishop to guide Trinity through the next two years was to have a plan of action. We received her permission to use this mission and ministry plan as a tool for this process. The council worked very hard to put a rather comprehensive plan together, and it has been sent to the Bishop. It will be shared with the congregation at Vestry, if not before.

There is a group of folks at St. James who have been meeting regularly to work together to develop St. James' Mission and Ministry Plan. I've dubbed them the M&M gang! They have had some great ideas too. At our last meeting just this past Monday, we posted the worksheets on the walls in the parish hall for everyone to see, and ask questions about at coffee hour. And there's a place to write down any ideas you have too. One idea we're so exciting about—under the loving service mark of mission, that we're going to start it next month—I'll talk more about it during the announcements time.

So on this Sunday, as we celebrate St. James 167th and Trinity's 168th, we give thanks for those who were here before us, whose passion and love for Christ's holy church, it's mission and ministry have brought us this far. We give thanks for God's faithfulness through the good times and bad. And we pray for the Holy Spirit's strength and guidance as we plan, and as we faithfully proceed with our mission and ministry plan, and come closer in our relationship with Jesus, as we work through the challenges of bringing Our Lord's Kingdom in this little corner of God's creation. Amen.

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