

'Stop making my Father's house a market place'

'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you
have made it a den of thieves.'

A place of worship is a place set apart where people may come to draw close to God and be alive to his presence, yet at the time of Jesus, part of the Temple had been turned into a market place. The Temple authorities had turned the demands of the Law into a money spinning opportunity.

The Law stipulated that animals for sacrifice had to be without blemish, and if these were bought outside the Temple, they were inevitably rejected and worshippers forced to buy from the authorities, and at premium prices. In addition, a Temple tax had to be paid, and again, normal currency had to be changed into Temple money, at poor rates of exchange.

All this went on in the Court of the Gentiles. The Temple was built in a series of courts. The first was the Court of the Gentiles, to which anyone could come and offer prayers. Then came the Court of the Women, which led into the Court of Israel, and finally into the Priests' Court with the Holy Place and Holy of Holies. No non-Jew was permitted to go beyond the Court of the Gentiles, so with it operating as a market place, they were effectively barred from worshipping God almighty. No wonder Jesus railed at this abuse "my house shall be called a House of Prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves."

God's whole purpose in calling Abraham, and through him the Jewish people, was for the nation to witness before the nations, and to draw them into the worship of God. As Micah said: Many nations will go, saying: ' Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the House of Jacob's God, that he may teach us his ways and

we may walk in his paths.” [Mic 4:2] And those who came to worship were denied the opportunity.

I suppose that it’s not surprising that it was the ordinary people who saw in Jesus the authentic voice of prophecy, rejected by the high and mighty. Jesus was too much of a threat to the status quo enjoyed by the Israeli leaders. Prophets are always a threat to long accepted ways, since they question and challenge these, calling people back to purer ways of worship. For the leaders of Israel, maintaining the beauty of the worship and the minutiae of the Law came to embody the heart of their worship, thereby diminishing the Covenant relationship with God to a formula.

This was the same fault of the mediaeval Church. This was at the heart of Luther’s discovery, that all is of grace. We can’t but our way into heaven, nor earn a place by good works. Love, especially God’s love, is always freely given, and has to be received as priceless gift. As Paul writes to Romans: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith – because it is the righteousness of God seen at work, beginning in faith and ending in faith; as Scripture says: whoever is justified through faith shall gain life.” [Rom 1: 16,17]

So Jesus clears the Temple of the buyers and sellers and the exchangers of money. No wonder people flocked to him. And he reaches out to them, making clear the nature of true religion, and bringing healing of body and mind. And he can do so today – bring healing and new life to our world. The trouble is that so much else appears to be more desirable, so we hold back, even deny the truth he came to reveal, and finding all sorts of false gods to worship. Yet the promise remains – to all who have faith, God’s love is poured out.

One Easter Sunday morning a pastor in Uganda was on his way home after taking the morning service when he was ambushed by an armed gang. “We’re going

to kill you,” said the leader. “If you have anything to say, say it now.”

The pastor was terrified. He thought to himself: ‘They won’t need to kill me, I’m going to drop dead with fear.’ From far away he heard a voice, and he was astonished to realise that it was his own voice speaking. “I do not need to plead my own cause,” he was saying, “My life is dead and hidden in Christ. It is your lives that are in danger, you are dead in your sins. I will pray to God that after you have killed me, he will spare you from eternal damnation.”

What happened next was even more surprising. The leader of the gang who a moment before had been threatening death, visibly changed. He said to the pastor: “Will you pray for us now?” And so the pastor was able to offer the men life – eternal like. He prayed for them, and the upshot was that the gang became members of the pastor’s church.

In a few moments we shall be coming to the altar and holding out empty hands to receive the gift of Christ himself in bread and wine. We don’t come because we’re virtuous, or for a reward for holy living, or because we’ve been generous, because none of these things open our way to God. We come because God offers himself to us in love, and we receive him in love as his free gift of grace. It is in response to his grace that we are opened to the endless possibilities of service.

We know what the Church is for; it is to declare God’s love in Christ to all people. But what should characterise the local church? What makes it unique? Important questions to ask at a dedication festival. Part of the answer is that this should be a place for healing, and above all the healing of our relationships both with God and our neighbor.

The clergy are tired of hearing that one doesn’t have to go to church to be a Christian. Maybe that is

possible, but the further away one is from the Church, the further away one is from the one who heals and renews. For the Church isn't the building, but the community of people who meet together there to worship and support one another.

Churches are never perfect, how can they be, made up of imperfect people like us. All too often congregations have within them some who are tonsils – we're no worse off when they've gone. Other are like the appendix, - we didn't notice you until you started grumbling. And some are like a badly fitting set of false teeth – sometimes in and sometimes out! Then there are the ones like bones – the wish bones: those who wish someone else would do all the work. Or the jaw bones: who talk a lot but do little else. The knuckle bones: who criticize what everyone else does. And finally, the back bones: who get on with things and do the work.

Yet in spite of the mixed variety of people, the Church remains a community where Christ is seen at work amongst his people – “for every time we celebrate Holy Communion, we declare the Lord's death until he comes.”

The Feast of the Dedication is the perfect day to remind ourselves that worship isn't a business, and faith can't be bought and sold. Salvation is God's gift to be received and shared. As we kneel to receive God's priceless gift, let it be with gratitude and eagerness, that this place may continue to be a place of healing, love and new life.

