



Reflection by Steve Sheldon

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
Matt 21:23-32
1st October 2023

In this reading, Jesus is confronted by those whom he would later call hypocrites, blind fools, vipers and white-washed tombs. While our papers are daily filled with stories of modern vipers, let's look at the hypocrites Jesus was dealing with in *his* day.

Representatives of Israel's ruling elite have come to Jesus while he's teaching in the Temple grounds and ask him, "What right have you to do these things? Who gave you this authority?"

The problem with just reading selected bits of the Bible is that we can sometimes lose much of the context. Here we lose the reference, the antecedent to "these", as in "What right do you have to do *these* things."

Just prior to this Jesus had been teaching and healing, but he had been doing this for the past 3 years, so we need to back up to the day before where Jesus went to the Temple and overturned the tables of the market traders.

So what was that all about? Why was Jesus so full of righteous anger? The prophet Isaiah said: "A *foreigner who has joined the Lord's people should not say, 'The Lord will not let me worship with his people.'* The Lord says to those foreigners who become part of his people, who love him and serve him, 'I will bring you to Zion, give you joy in my house of prayer, and accept the sacrifices you offer on my altar. My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations." Amazingly that last phrase often gets dropped when this story is told, which causes it to lose its meaning. To say that a Temple will be called a house of prayer is stating the obvious; to say no more implies that Jesus' objection was to the noise and hubbub of the market stalls in the Outer Courtyard distracting from the quiet reverential calm of the Inner Courtyard.

But that's not the point. The Outer Courtyard where the merchants had their stalls was called the Courtyard of the Gentiles. This was where non-Jews who sought to worship the one true God of Israel were allowed to offer their prayers. Gentile converts were not permitted in the Inner Courtyard and had to gather in the space that was now dominated by mercantile activity: lucrative mercantile activity that netted a tidy sum in ground rent for the Temple treasury. So Jesus' objection is not about the carrying on of trade within the Temple grounds, but the fact that the trade prevented Gentiles from worshipping there.

Zechariah wrote that a time was coming when all the nations of the world would come to worship God in the Temple and "when that time comes there will no longer be any merchants in the Temple." Jesus was bringing to life that very prophesy. His actions were confirming his spoken message about the Kingdom of God including everybody.

Jeremiah wrote, "Be fair in treatment of one another. Stop taking advantage of foreigners, widows and orphans. Stop killing innocent people..."

...You do the things I hate and then come and stand in my presence, in my own Temple and say, 'We are safe!' Do you think my Temple is a hiding place for thieves?" Jesus said that, yes it is, you *have* turned the Temple into a hiding place for thieves.

John the Baptist said, "Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of God is near. Do those things that show that you have turned from your sins. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus made John's warning direct and personal when he told Israel's elite, "The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits." And so the priests and lawyers and elders were now angry, afraid and directly threatened, and we know that leads to Golgotha.

Jesus' enacted prophesy, the clearing out of the Temple's Outer Courtyard, was his declaration that the movement to usher in the Kingdom of God was beginning now. Jesus was saying that God would no longer tolerate a status quo that hindered God's mission to bring all of humanity into a loving relationship with him.

This has always been God's mission. It was Israel's mission, to be a beacon on a hill drawing the world to the truth. It was Jesus' mission, coming to the world to speak about the truth. It is now the Church's mission to be that beacon, to speak that truth about God. Like Israel, like Jesus, we are to trust in God, to have faith in God and be an example of God's love so that the world may come to know him through us and our actions.

We are to produce that proper fruit, the good fruit. That's our mission. Mission is not about bums on seats, headcounts, and who's got the biggest attendance. But then the job of bringing in the Kingdom does get that much harder the fewer of us there are. The responsibility we have been handed is a lot easier if there are more of us here to share the workload, with the greater diversity of skills that would result in. *But that's not the mission.* Bearing proper fruit is the mission. Being an example for all to see is the mission. Making sure there is plenty of space in the Courtyard *for everyone* to join in and praise God is the mission. For everyone to join in. For all the people of all the nations... for all the people of our neighbourhood... all bearing the proper fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

What I want you to think about in the days to come is how Jesus cleared the Courtyard of the Temple so that the outsiders, could come in and worship God. How best can the Courtyard of this Temple, our parishes, be cleared of any rubble, of any impediment that prevents outsiders being drawn to come in and worship God? Worshipping God, and producing that good fruit.