

# **We need more than a building...**

*... we need a saviour who saves us from ourselves*

---

*A sermon given on the THird Sunday of Lent, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.*

*John 5:13-22*

During Lent, we have been running a Lent Course, looking at a number of films which in different ways explore the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. And last Tuesday, we met to discuss Clint Eastwood's 'Gran Torino', a story about an old man, a retired Detroit car worker who, against his ingrained racist instincts, finds himself befriended by an immigrant family next door. And as the story moves towards its climax, in the end, he lays down his life for the benefit of his immigrant neighbours to save them from a gang that is terrorising the neighbourhood.

It's a great film and we had a lively discussion about it, but amongst the critics, it is a film that has been criticised for being an example of the 'white saviour' trope, which is a Hollywood failing where films are made that tend to show a white hero rescuing black or people of another ethnic background and seeming to imply that they can't do it by themselves. And there's a number of books and films where you can see this: a very famous one is 'To Kill a Mockingbird', where you have a white lawyer defending a black man unjustly accused of rape in Alabama in the 1920s; or a film like 'The Help' about a young white journalist who exposes the way in which domestic workers are exploited.

And it raises the question, 'What qualifications does a genuine saviour need to have?' And it's a question which is also addressed in today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus famously attacks the temple and the money-changers and the traders selling animals for the sacrifices. The thing that's interesting about this is that these traders were a necessary part of the temple institution: people needed to be able to buy animals to offer a sacrifice. And because the coinage in the Roman province bore the image of the emperor and an inscription declaring him to be 'Son of God', the coinage was literally blasphemous. And so the temple authorities insisted that before you bought anything in the temple, you had to change your Roman coinage into temple coinage that didn't have any offensive imagery or wording on it. So when Jesus attacks these things, he seems to be attacking not just a few abuses in the system, but the very system itself. And he declares, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up."

And this episode comes right at the start of John's Gospel - in the other Gospels, it's part of the events leading to Jesus's passion. But in John, it's right at the beginning; it's programmatic; it sets the course for the rest of Jesus's ministry. And so begs the question, 'What is wrong with the temple' which had been such a central part of the Old Testament worship of the Israelites? The temple spoke of the presence of God in the midst of his people; it spoke of the creator of the universe being present on earth, in a particular place. But it didn't speak so powerfully of the salvation of God. God had promised to dwell in the temple - there are a number of psalms that celebrate this : 'Sing praises to the Lord who dwells in Zion' or the prophet Habakkuk, who says, "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him." So there is the sense that the temple is where God is to be found on earth, the one place he has promised to be.

But the ideology surrounding the temple tended to make Israel complacent: it enabled them to say, 'God is here, we are his people, and nothing needs to change.' It legitimated the power of the monarchy and the kings of Israel tended to become more and more oppressive and tyrannical saying, 'We've got God's backing; we have the temple; God is in our midst; this is the way things have to be.' And everybody rather lost sight of Israel's origins as a people redeemed from slavery in Egypt, rescued by a dynamic God, almost literally lifting them out of slavery and bringing them across the Red Sea and into a land of their own.

The temple was strong on the idea of God's glory and presence and the affirmation of his people, but it was weak on Israel's need of salvation and rescue and transformation. So when Jesus turns up and attacks the mechanisms that allow the temple to function, the traders and the money changers and declares, "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up" he is not only highlighting the shortcomings of the temple as a means of God's salvation, he's also proposing himself as the new temple.

And as I say, this story comes at the start of the Gospel and John is the theologian of the incarnation of the word made flesh of God becoming human. And so the Gospel presents Jesus as the new temple. He was speaking at the temple of his body; the place where God and humanity meet; where heaven and earth touch each other; where God stoops down and becomes one of us in order that we may be changed and may become more and more growing into the likeness of God and becoming his children.

So it's not just about Jesus being the meeting point between God and humanity, but it's also about Jesus suffering, entering death on our behalf and being raised again, setting

the pattern of how God enters our humanity so we can enter his divinity. So for John, Jesus's ministry is about a building being replaced by a person. A building can speak very powerfully of the presence of God, but a person can embody the love of God and draw from others a response of faith and commitment.

And for centuries, the early church debated exactly how Jesus could be both God and man: was he just a unique and exemplary man; or was he just God in disguise as a human? And they ended up concluding something we recite in the Nicene Creed, 'No, he was fully human and fully divine.' If he's not fully human, he cannot properly represent us. And that's the problem with the 'white saviour' trope - if the saviour figure isn't truly one of the people needing salvation, he or she cannot properly represent them. On the other hand if he's not fully divine, he cannot transcend the situation - he will still be in need of salvation himself: a true saviour must be able to identify fully with those needing to be saved, but must also be slightly set apart in order to make any fundamental difference. So the saviour you believe in will shape the kind of salvation you expect. Do you look for a God of presence? Are there special places where you feel God to be particularly with you? Beverly Minster might be such a place; or a beautiful spot in the countryside; or a place associated with special memories; or maybe somewhere where you've encountered God in the past. Seeking the presence of God is important: it's where faith begins and in a sense, it's where faith ends. But how does that help you when you need rescuing? When, for example, you feel you're not good enough for God; or that God isn't interested in you and won't pay you any attention; or if you're trapped in self-destructive habits - then, you don't need the presence of God, you need the transforming power of God. When you're angry and upset at the injustice in the world (and I hope you often are because there's so much wrong with our world), the presence of God only can seem to collude with the way things are: we need a saviour who will stand with us in challenging what is wrong; who will draw upon himself the evil of the world and flush it out; take it upon himself unto death; we need more than a building; we need a saviour who will show us the love of God, not in a static, complacent way, but in a living, dynamic, transforming way; a saviour who will save us from ourselves; who will strengthen us for a new kind of living in the power of his love.

At the end of the Bible in the New Jerusalem, we are told there is NO temple, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb, drawing in all the nations to worship.

So let us today come to the Lord's table, either physically or in your heart; enter the temple of his presence; receive the body and blood of Christ by faith, whether here or at home.

And in so doing, God promises to grow us together into a Holy Temple in the Lord, building us into a dwelling place for God by his Spirit. It's a lofty and exalted calling for the church: it invites us to share in the work of making God's presence known, but also in making his salvation a reality. And it begins with our response as we offer ourselves now.

# Reading Text

John 5:13-22

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.