

SERMON: 7 March 2021 – The Moderator Rt Rev Martin Fair

John 2:13-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable and to you Lord, Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We're going to reflect for a few moments on that well known passage which is referred to as the cleansing of the temple. We find it there in the reading we had this morning from John's gospel. Of course, it comes pretty near the beginning in John's Gospel, yet it's set much later in the other gospels, but will set aside for now why that might be. It just interests me that John has it in the context of the Passover, Jesus is going to celebrate the Passover here at the beginning of his public ministry, and then at the end of his ministry, when he is with his disciples celebrating, what we now call the Lord supper, before his arrest and trial and crucifixion. That too is set against the backdrop of the Passover. So at the beginning and the end we have Jesus observing the traditions of his people. I think it's important to say that because in the passage of course we have the turning of the tables that driving out of the market sellers. It seems that Jesus is intent on tearing up all of those traditions. Well of course something had gone wrong in what was going on in the temple, but that shouldn't be taken to mean that Jesus was getting rid of all that was dear to his people. Far from it. Throughout the whole of the gospel pictures, we have Jesus very much faithfully observing the ways of his people. It seems to me that as a church now, as we try to embrace what we described a couple of years ago as a radical plan, that in embracing the radical, it doesn't mean that we throw away everything that was. It is much that can continue to enrich our lives. So we need to dig deep into the traditions of our people, and to see what will sustain us as we go forward. Of course there are things that we would be better to leave behind, but there are things too which will be important as we go forward.

Well the passage, of course, takes us to the temple. Jesus has gone there. People would have been gathered from all places. And we read that he sees what's going on there by way of selling and marketing and so on. And he fashions for himself whip made out of cord or rope. It strikes me as interesting that he took the time to do that. It was a thoughtful response, in other words, to what was going on. It wasn't that he had a whip in his back pocket and in a moment of rage and he pulled it out. No. The text tells us that he made a whip for himself to drive out those who were selling and, as it were, defiling the temple. He took his time and what he was doing before responding. I wonder if there is a wee lesson for life in that. I wonder if somethings we fly off the handle without thinking about what we're doing. Whatever else Jesus was doing that day it wasn't a moment of thoughtless rage. Rather it was carefully considered. He describes the temple thus: he says to the people gathered there you've made it on marketplace. You made it a marketplace. Now if you're going to Matthew's gospel you hear that spell that little more. Jesus says it should be a House of prayer and you've made it into a marketplace. I wonder if people today think of our churches as houses of prayer. I mean if you were to go around your wider communities, if you were to stop

people in the street, people perhaps not familiar with church, and if you were to point to a church building and ask them, what goes on in there? Do you think the first thing they would say is, 'well tat's a house of prayer. People gather there to pray.' I'm not sure that would be top of people's lists. Somethings we've only got ourselves to blame for that. Some years ago, I was driving through Dundee. I won't be a anymore specific than that. But as I was coming up one particular road, there was a church before me. The scene was dominated by a large vinal banner. And on that banner, it said this: jumble sale every Saturday. What message did that banner hive out? What would people think as to the activities of that church?

You see somethings were so focused on our activities that perhaps the whole business of being a house of prayer is masked or somehow put into the background, or on our websites, or pour notice boards, if we still have such a thing. We are keen to make a lists of all that's on. Monday morning toddlers, Tuesday afternoon guild, Wednesday sale of work, Thursday coffee morning and on and on it goes. A hive of activity. Is there room in there for our churches to be houses of prayer?

When you look into the New Testament you see that prayer was so central to the life of the early church. I love the early parts of the book of Acts it gives a wonderful description of the church in Jerusalem as it was for those first believers. We hear that they met frequently together in one another's houses. That they shared table fellowship together. That they celebrated bread and wine together. That they learned from the apostles. That they shared things in common so that those in need didn't go without. That was the life of the church. But central to it, and as we read time and time again, they met frequently to pray. Everything that they did was started in prayer. When they faced a challenge, they got together to pray about it. Prayer was all over the life of the early church. Can it be said of the church today? Does this describe the life of your congregation today? Do people think of your church and think of it as a house of prayer?

I long for the church in Scotland to be all that it can be. I long for the church to be central in the life of our country. I long for it to be that folks of all across the nation from all walks of life all look to the church as a place of hope, as a place to find meaning and purpose in life, as a place of healing and reconciliation and as a place where the presence of God is to be found. I long for that.

Let me use some other language and say: I long for a revival in the church across this nation. Not for the sake of the church in itself, but so that God maybe known again, most fully across this nation. When you trace back the history of revivals, and lets just use one example, the Hebrides revival in the late 40s. you find that that the revival was preceded by faithful prayer. The people were on their knees before God calling out to him. There is a wonderful verse in the book of 2nd Chronicles, in the Old Testament, and we have it like this. If my people will humble themselves, if they will seek my face, if they will pray, if they will turn from their wicked ways, then, then I will come to them. I wonder if we need again to find ourselves on our knees in prayer. Might it be that a season of prayer lies before us. Oh, yes individually in our devotions, but also together in our churches, so that our churches might be known as houses of prayer primarily, before any of the activity that comes thereafter. Jesus certainly saw the temple as a place that was supposed to be dedicated to God and a place where

people met God and yes, a House of prayer. Anything that gets the way of that has to be questioned. And so that's why Jesus drove out those market sellers who were, of course, offering their doves and different animals that could be bought and be used for sacrifices, because all of that somehow was getting in the way. And somehow was acting as a barrier for ordinary folks to come into the temple and there to encounter God, and there to pray to god and meet God.

I wonder if Jesus was to come into our churches today, what would be that he would want to clear away? What would he say, we have no use of this? What would he cleanse from our churches? Now I can't answer that for your particular congregations. That's up to you to do a very careful examination. To look at everything that you do as a church and to ask, is this needed? Is this necessary or is this in fact getting underway of people's search for God. If so, then let us be repentant of that. I'd like us to be prepared to put aside that which might act as a stumbling block, that which might be a barrier to people getting close to God.

You know, we become in our churches very, very familiar with our way of doing things. Just the way it is, isn't it? This is the culture of our congregation, this is just the way we do things. But might it be that some of those ways, some of those things we do are difficult for other people and make it harder for other people to find their way into the life of the church and therefore finding themselves closer to God. We need to be ready to examine everything about our congregations and to ask ourselves if it's time for it to be cleared. I think we have an ideal opportunity to do something of that, not just congregations actually but across the whole of the denomination. To do a kind of re-prioritisation service. This is a moment, as we begin to think about what church would look like on

the far side of the pandemic, to ask what do we want it to look like; how can it more truly conform to a church that would be pleasing to our Lord and saviour.

Now is the time to be asking questions. The reopening of churches will be upon us soon enough; small numbers to begin with, of course, but then growing and in time, when safe to do so and when the vaccination programme is complete or more or less, we will see our churches open again in more like the sense that we once knew. We will be able to gather again in different ways. It may not approximate or be much like what we knew, but they will be possibilities again. And I want us to be asking the important questions: what will church look like; what will be key and important and crucial. What will be front and centre in the life of our churches, and what do we need to push aside and be done with. Might I encourage the church, individual congregations and more widely, to see yourselves as being houses of prayer, places where people may come and encounter the living God.

I reckon that that must be the starting place if our churches are to become again instruments in the hands of an Almighty God who is not done with Scotland; who has good news for Scotland; who wants that good news proclaimed to the poor; who wants sight for the blind, liberty to the captives. Yes, good news for the people of Scotland and that news to come through the church in preparation for opening. Let's be people of prayer and let churches be houses of prayer. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

Loving Lord, we marvel that you choose to use us, the church, to bring good news to a broken world. And so today we pray for the church as it is found across the whole of the world, across this country and today in particular for the church within the bounds of the presbytery of West Lothian.

We pray for each and every congregation,

those ones which are thriving,
those which are surviving,
and those which are struggling to keep going.
Lord for renewed strength and vision we pray.

You call each one of us to minister rather than to spectate, and yet some are called to particular ministries and we asked a blessing upon them this morning, that you would grant them every necessary gift,

as they seek to lead your church at this time,

as they seek to minister your word,

as they seek to envision mission in such changed circumstances.

We pay a Lord for all those who are office bearers, who serve with gift and ability and experience, session Clarks, treasures, safeguarding officers, Sunday club leaders, those who care for the elderly and the alone, and the isolated, those who are anxious and feel themselves to be very vulnerable in these days. For all who serve Lord through the church we give you thanks.

but in praying for the church we want to pray too for the communities the church serves. You know Lord those needs better even than we do, so open our eyes to see where need lies, and then grant us vision and energy and enthusiasm and all necessary resources that your church might need that meet the needs of the people of our communities in these days; that we might be good news to the poor; that we might be able to proclaim released to the captives, sight to the blind. Equip your church Lord to be the salt of the earth and light for the world as Christ himself is.

So Lord for the presbytery of West Lothian and for the church across its bounds we pray, and we pray confidently because we ask in Jesus' name. Amen