

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Third Sunday of Lent

It is interesting to note, that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) all report Jesus' outrage at what he found in the temple courtyard, and his response in driving out all those who were trading in temple coin, sacrificial animals or grain, as taking place after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But John describes the event as happening at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, immediately after Jesus first miracle when he turned water into wine, at the wedding at Cana.

The incident in the temple is described in the Synoptic Gospels as the last public act, the last straw if you will, that determines the religious authorities to arrest Jesus and put him to death. In John's Gospel however, the straw that metaphorically breaks the religious authorities' back is the raising of Jesus' friend Lazarus. Ironically, bringing life to Lazarus helps to bring about Jesus' death.

In our Gospel passage (John 2: 13 – 22), John tells us that Jesus had returned to Capernaum from Cana with his mother, brothers and his disciples. John tells us that Jesus' disciples believed in him after seeing Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine. It must have been quite a thing to behold. The man who had so recently called them to follow him, had produced vast quantities of the very best wine out of ordinary water. And not just drinking water, but the water that had been put aside for ritual washing of people's feet! No matter how charismatic Jesus was, nothing could have prepared them for what they had witnessed at that wedding in Cana. With the cleansing of the temple following on so quickly from Jesus' miracle, I wonder if John is trying to show us how the disciples were beginning to understand who Jesus really is?

If the disciples had believed in Jesus just because of that first miracle, their belief would have been shaken when difficulties arose. Their belief needs to be deepened and extended beyond one miraculous serving of wine. Believing in Jesus and understanding how scripture points to Jesus, helps the disciples understand how Jesus relates to God. God who sent him into the world out of love for humanity. John's description of Jesus' actions in the temple helps to clarify Jesus' identity for the disciples.

The passage opens with John describing Jesus coming into the temple and making a whip of cords to drive out the traders and their wares. Anyone visiting the temple wouldn't have been surprised by the trading going on in the courtyard. The transactions of the marketplace were essential for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures in the temple. In John's account, unlike that of the Synoptics, Jesus is not claiming mismanagement or cheating of the pilgrims attending the temple. Instead, he is calling for the removal of the whole sacrificial system. By his actions, Jesus is telling the disciples, the religious authorities and us, that there will no longer be any need for complicated transactions before worship. He is prophesying that his ultimate sacrifice means that birds, animals or grain will not be needed for sacrificial worship.

The Jewish authorities challenge Jesus to justify his actions, and at that point he comes out with a statement so outrageous and incomprehensible to all who were listening to him - Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple, the holy of holies, the place where the Jewish people felt that they could meet with God. Not only that, Jesus prophesied the rebuilding of the temple within

3 days. The authorities and the disciples take his words literally, they didn't understand that Jesus was speaking of his own death and resurrection. His body would be the new temple, though which we can all meet with God.

When John's Gospel was written, the temple in Jerusalem where they were standing *had* been destroyed and Jesus *had* been raised from the dead after 3 days. The disciples, unlike us, didn't have the benefit of this information. The disciples don't understand Jesus' prophesy. But after his death and resurrection, they remember Jesus' prophetic words. They recall the scriptural references to the Messiah. They remember all they had learnt about Jesus' ministry and all they had experienced during their time together. When they experienced the reality of Jesus' prophesy being fulfilled by his death and resurrection along with their belief in scripture pointing to Jesus, their belief in the truth of Jesus' prophetic word is renewed.

So what does this mean for us? John's Gospel reminds us that if we pay attention to the words and actions of Jesus then they will be revealed to us as true and reliable and our belief will be renewed. Jesus' words and actions may be at times, incomprehensible to us, but if we engage with those words and actions, and keep in mind scriptural references, we will be brought, like those first disciples, to a place where they come together for us and belief is renewed in both our hearts and minds.

John's Gospel also reminds us that by engaging with scripture, experiencing the truth of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, and remembering his words and actions our belief will mature, deepen and expand.

This is only possible because it is the same God who sent the prophets whose words are captured in scripture. The same God who sent Jesus to live and die for us. The same God who through grace raised Jesus from the dead and the same God who continues to engage with the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God's faithfulness to us, God's beloved creation is never ending.

Amen