

Scripture Readings for March 7th 2021

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NIV)

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”¹

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22 (NIV)

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”²

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon: “God’s Presence is Where?”

If you’ve ever watched a movie about Jesus, you will have likely seen our reading’s dramatic events of Jesus overturning the moneychangers’ tables in the temple forecourt, and driving away the sacrificial animals.³ Film directors are irresistibly drawn to this scene of violence because it appears to reveal Jesus as having lost his temper and brandishing some kind of whip. What are we to make of this episode,

¹ Isaiah 29:14.

² Psalm 69:9.

³ John 2:13-22. (Note only John’s gospel mentions the cattle, sheep – and the whip!)

particularly as Jesus goes down in history for advocating *nonviolence* resistance?⁴ What we can say is that whatever degree of force was used, the action took on *nothing* of a riotous character that would have attracted swift and sharp intervention from the Roman garrison in the Antonia fortress that overlooked the Temple area. Since Jesus wasn't arrested for his actions that day, this incident may have been largely symbolic and alluding to Zechariah 14:21, where it says: ". . . there shall no longer be *traders* in the house of the LORD on that day."⁵ It could also refer to Malachi 3:1-4 where we read, "the LORD will come to his temple. . ." to purify and refine the priests and their practices. That being the case, John is not so much concerned with *precisely* what Jesus did, but to remind his readers that these events *actually* took place and that this incident – through the lens of the Old Testament Scriptures – points to *who* Jesus is. Moreover, this "clearing of the Temple" highlights the challenge that Jesus and his message poses to the existing religious order.⁶ In fact, this is so important to John that he places it near the *beginning* of his gospel,⁷ whereas the other gospel writers have this event taking place at the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life.⁸ For John, then, the *theological* significance of this event is *more important* than its *chronological* timing.⁹ So *why* is it so important? What might this mean for Christians today? That's what we will explore this morning.

Let's begin by back-tracking to the temple practices. Why are people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and changing money in the first place? You will recall that Passover was the key pilgrimage feast, when the people remembered and reenacted the exodus from Egypt, with its killing of the Passover lamb and the sharing of a special meal.¹⁰ Consequently, Passover was – and still is - the time for celebrating liberation, freedom, and Israel's rescue from slavery.¹¹ Unblemished animals and birds (doves and pigeons) were required in *huge* numbers for burnt offerings in the Temple.¹² However, many of those coming to worship in the Temple would have journeyed great distances and would not have been able to bring animals with them.¹³ They therefore needed to buy animals in Jerusalem in order to participate

⁴ See Matt 5:39 and Luke 6:29 on "turning the other cheek" See also 1 Thess 5:1; 1 Pet 3:8-10; Rom 12:14-21. Some like this story claiming that it reveals a very *human* Jesus. From John 1:14 it is evident that this is *not* John's perspective or emphasis.

⁵ NRSV, CJB. The "day" mentioned appears eschatological, but includes *all* the nations coming to worship God; Zech 14:9,16.

⁶ John presents Jesus in part by seven "signs," the first of which occurs at the wedding of Cana revealing the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life that Jesus offers (John 2:1-11, cf. 1 Kings 17:8-16; 2 Kings 4:1-7). Today's event follows immediately after (in John's skillful retelling) . . . but the action is now public and in Jerusalem.

⁷ In fact, John mentions the Passover in Jerusalem *three* times: John 2:13; 6:4; 13:1. In John 1:29, 36, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" This symbolism is important to John's chronology and understanding of *who* Jesus is. (See also John 5:16-30.)

⁸ See: Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48.

⁹ It is unlikely that Jesus performed his bold act twice! The synoptic chronology is considered to be historically more reliable because it's difficult to see how the Jewish religious authorities would have tolerated such a confrontational act at the *beginning* of Jesus's ministry. Regardless, John's gospel is often seen as a *theological* commentary on key events in the life of Jesus, rather than a historical "biography," as such. When reading John, always be asking: "What does this *mean*?"!

¹⁰ See Exod 12.

¹¹ John wants his readers to understand what Jesus did at the Temple is a hint of the new meaning that Jesus is going to give to Passover itself.

¹² See Lev 1, 3.

¹³ There is some evidence that several 100,000 people (or more) would be have been there for Passover

in the Temple practices. The other gospels imply there was some price gouging going on.¹⁴ Moreover, the temple tax could *not* be paid in Greek or Roman currency because the human image of the Emperor's head was on those coins.¹⁵ The Torah prohibits acknowledgment of any other gods, and (graven) images of any kind.¹⁶ Therefore, foreign coinage had to be changed to the legal currency for Jerusalem – and hence the need for “moneychangers.” Foreigners, whether (diaspora) Jews or non-Jews, were at a disadvantage here, and so such practices were a barrier to worshipping God.

Jesus scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables, and drove the sheep and cattle away!¹⁷ He shouted, “Stop turning my Father's house into a *marketplace!*”¹⁸ What Jesus is doing here is challenging the whole temple *system*, not just its abuses. Notice that the temple leaders *didn't* ask Jesus “*Why* are you doing this?” Perhaps they knew their Scriptures and recognized that *prophets* were reformers of the status quo and purifiers of religious practice.¹⁹ Instead they ask Jesus for evidence, or for a *sign*, that he was the one with the *authority* to do this!²⁰ What does Jesus say? “*You* destroy this temple. And in three days *I* will raise it up!”²¹

John now uses his “misunderstanding” technique to show how the audience *only* sees the *surface* meaning, and then he explains the *deeper* meaning, one that points to Jesus rather than to the temple.²² They respond with incredulity: the temple reconstruction program has been underway for 46 years²³ – what do you mean, rebuild it in 3 days!? Even in chapter 2 of his gospel, John is hinting at the death and resurrection of Jesus by providing a commentary for his readers, explaining: “But Jesus was speaking about *the temple of his body.*”²⁴ I will talk more about what that means in a moment. John then explains the disciples “*aha*” moment of understanding came later, *after* his resurrection, when they were recalling and pondering the things Jesus had done and said.²⁵

So much for the details of John's account. What is the big deal here? For that we need to zoom back and ask, “*Where* is the presence of God located in the world?” To the Jews at that time the answer was simple: “*In the temple.*” John, however, understood the divine presence to be literally *embodied* in

¹⁴ See Matt 12:13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:16 – citing Jer 7:11 (“den of robbers”). John does not mention that aspect.

¹⁵ See Matt 22:15–22; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Give-to-God-What-is-Gods.pdf> .

¹⁶ See Exod 20:3-4; Deut 5:7-8.

¹⁷ John 2:15.

¹⁸ John 2:16; Zech 14:21 (NRSV). Note that the disciples function as (post-resurrection) witnesses; see John 2:17: “His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will *consume* me (Ps 69:9).”

¹⁹ See Mal 3:1-4.

²⁰ John 2:18. (Note: This conversation is only reported on John's gospel.)

²¹ John 2:19. The “*you*” is implied, perhaps as in: “Go ahead and do this and see what happens!” (i.e., an ironic imperative). See also Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29 and Acts 6:14.

²² John 2:20-21. This occurs again in John 3 in conversation with Nicodemus – “You must be born again,” John 3:3-5.

²³ The rebuilding of the Temple was begun approximately 19 BC during the reign of King Herod the Great. The reference to 46 years of the construction would suggest the date of 27 AD for *this* conversation. That date is historically plausible, since John has this incident occurring at the beginning of Jesus ministry which most people consider lasted approximately 3 years.

²⁴ John 2:21. In other words, this is about Jesus *not* the physical temple. See also John 6:6; 11:13, 51–52; 12:6, 33.

²⁵ Compare John 2:22 with 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; 21:14.

Jesus the Messiah. The locus of worship therefore was no longer the temple in Jerusalem but in Jesus himself; in other words, no longer in a *place* but in a *person*.²⁶ That's *radical* thinking! Earlier in John chapter one, he writes: "Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his *glory*—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father."²⁷ The "took up residence" phrase is literally "tabernacled" in Greek and alludes to where the *Shekinah*—the visible glory of God's presence—resided. The implication being that the divine glory is now to be seen in Jesus, and they had witnessed it! As I mentioned a moment ago, the bodily resurrection of Jesus forced his followers to rethink who Jesus was—and is—in light of God's action in raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus' cryptic comments began to make sense as the Holy Spirit revealed the ongoing truth about Jesus to them.²⁸

I believe John's insight is profound.²⁹ Nevertheless, is this perspective unique to John? No, we can discern this idea of God's glory residing uniquely in Jesus in the other gospels too. We heard about that a few weeks ago on Transfiguration Sunday,³⁰ when Jesus was briefly revealed in glory. The notion of God's presence being in a human temple is also implied in Paul's writings. This becomes clear if we ask the question: "If Jesus is the new temple, then what happened after the *ascension*?" Paul regards the Church as the "body of Christ"³¹ and that makes the Church the new temple—the place where God's Spirit resides.³² In other words, the risen Jesus *passed* on his authority to the church.³³ Paul, or possibly one of his associates, writes in Ephesians: "You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, *grows into a holy temple in the Lord*, in whom you also are being built together into *a dwelling place of God in the Spirit*."³⁴ According to Paul, then, the collective body of the Church is now the temple of the Holy Spirit. This being the case, the Church is where you would (at least) expect to find the divine

²⁶ Recall that John is writing after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, and that cataclysmic event changed the Jewish religious landscape forever. The destruction of the temple was therefore understood to have *theological* significance.

²⁷ John 1:14 (NET); see also John 1:18, Ezek 43:7; Zech 2:10.

²⁸ See John 14:25–26; 16:13–16.

²⁹ In John 4:1–42 (esp. 19–24), he reports a detailed conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well, one which included the contentious issue as to *where* was the appropriate place to worship God. (The Samaritans worshiped God on their holy Mount Gerizim, whereas the Jews obviously worshiped God at the temple in Jerusalem.) Jesus responds by saying that the time is coming when the *location* of God's (assumed) presence will be irrelevant: "A time is coming—and now is here—when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such people to be his worshipers. God is spirit, and the people who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23–24 (NET), see also Acts 7:48–50, citing Isa 66:1–2). Implicit in this text is that this "coming time," or new era, has arrived in the person of Jesus himself, and that God can now be worshipped *anywhere*; it's not restricted to traditional holy sites. That's *also* radical thinking!

³⁰ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-View-From-Here.pdf> .

³¹ See 1 Cor 12:13, 27; Rom 12:4; Col 1:18, 24.

³² The Holy Spirit dwells in the church, but *not* exclusively so, nor is the Spirit the prerogative of the church. The Spirit is always going *ahead* of the church in *God's* mission (*missio Dei*); we see this in Acts 10 and on Paul's missionary journeys.

³³ See John 20:21–23; Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:45–49.

³⁴ Eph 2:20–22 (NET, emphasis mine); note the "you" here is plural. See also 1 Cor 3:16, 6:15a; 2 Cor 6:16 (along with Lev 26:12; Jer 32:38; Ezek 37:27), and 1 Pet 2:5.

presence today. This powerful image is both an honor and a daunting responsibility, and the worldwide Church has not always lived up to this high calling.

Taken altogether, John's account of the dramatic actions of Jesus in the temple forecourt challenges the *authority* of the temple itself – quite literally shaking its spiritual foundations. On that particular day, Jesus threw the mechanics of temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one of the most significant Jewish feasts of the year. Jesus as *challenger* of the religious status quo is therefore a key theme in John's gospel and he wants his reader to understand that early on. John also reveals Jesus as the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world; in order words, John sees Jesus as *reforming* the whole meaning of Passover itself.³⁵ You can see why all this is such a big deal. John is saying that Jesus has changed *everything* because he himself is the *final* sacrifice. We are “saved by the blood of the lamb,” by the death of Jesus. John is not alone here; many other New Testament writers say the same things.³⁶ Matthew, for example, in the context of Jesus, the Son of Man, being Lord of the Sabbath reports Jesus as saying, “I tell you, something *greater* than the *temple* is here.”³⁷ That's *huge*! And this statement connects with the claim, “The Son of Man has authority on earth *to forgive sins*,”³⁸ which I spoke about a few weeks ago.³⁹ Such a claim challenges the traditional function of the temple itself, with its sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin.

It is good to be reminded about the significance and implications of what Jesus said and did during the build up to Easter. But let's end today by reconsidering that God's presence – God's Spirit – is to be found in the worldwide Church today. That presence doesn't always shine as brightly as it needs to. Not many congregations are functioning as that bright lamp on a lampstand,⁴⁰ shining for all to see. I wonder what Jesus would have to say about that? The ways of the “world” have a tendency to invade churches gradually, subtly, never intentionally, always “in the service of the Church and its mission.” Yet the outcome can be a well-meaning church that is full of the modern equivalents of cattle, sheep, and moneychangers! And those things create unnecessary barriers between the people and God, making church a “marketplace” rather than a “house of prayer.” Therefore, we have to ask what is it about *our* religious *practices* – yes, and *institutions* – that are need of reformation and renewal. I leave you with that thought as we journey through Lent. Amen.

³⁵ John clearly compares Jesus to the Passover lamb by saying that Jesus was crucified the same day that the Passover lambs were being killed in the Temple (John 19:31; 1:29, 36). This automatically makes the temple superfluous to requirement.

³⁶ See also: Matt 26:27-28; Luke 22:0; Acts 20:28; Rom 3:24-25; Col 1:20; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:14, 22; 10:19; 13:12; 1 John 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 1:5; 7:14; 12:11;

³⁷ Matt 12:6.

³⁸ See: Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24.

³⁹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Whole-Bodied-Salvation.pdf> .

⁴⁰ See Matt 5:14-16.