



La Côte Anglican Church

Third Sunday in Lent – Sermon from Clare Amos

3 March 2024 – Holy Communion in Gingins

As some of you may know I am fascinated by images of Jesus which come from different parts of the world, in which people from varied lands and cultures seek to share their perceptions of how Jesus is the Christ for all people.

It has sometimes been noted that there are comparatively few pictures Jesus which portray him as smiling or laughing, which is a real pity. The Gospels seem to suggest Jesus was a figure who enjoyed a joke and shared in human joy and laughter, and it is good to remember that. So here are two examples – one called the Smiling Christ, the other the Laughing Christ, which offer us such a image. The ‘Smiling Christ’ – from Korea – is quite startling – perhaps even shocking - when you realise that alongside Jesus’ smile we are being shown the wounds of crucifixion in his side.

But perhaps even rarer than smiling or laughing Christs, is a picture of Christ as angry. We find ourselves quite uncomfortable with the idea of an angry Jesus. However there are a couple of well known portrayals of Jesus which are explicitly named ‘the Angry Christ’. I am showing one now. It comes from the Philippines, and it is reflecting what the artist felt would have been Jesus’ response to the corruption and injustice that has so often marked out Phillipino society. This definitely gives us a ‘Jesus Christ who is raging’, as the song we have just sung puts it.

The Gospels suggest to us that there was at least one occasion in his life and ministry when Jesus was deeply angry and expressed his anger in physical terms. That incident is what seems to be reflected in the picture we are looking at. It was when Jesus as we put it, ‘cleansed the Temple’, which we have read about in today’s Gospel. The buying and selling of animals, the changing of money, which was a necessary part of how the Temple ‘system’ had evolved, seemed to have angered Jesus for several reasons; the exploitation of the poor, the opportunities for corruption, the apparent prioritization of commerce over prayer and worship, perhaps also the discrimination against women, or the handicapped or foreigners that had become so much a part of the ‘system.’

And so Jesus got angry and on this occasion expressed his anger in direct action.

The incident is normally referred to as 'the Cleansing of the Temple'. But that title may not fully describe the significance of Jesus' action as we are told about in the Gospel of John. In John's Gospel Jesus is more through-going in his activity than he is in Matthew, Mark and Luke – not only clearing out the human beings, who might be held personally responsible for their presence in the place, but also the sacrificial animals who presumably weren't and for whom their expulsion would have acted as a sort of liberation! That difference, as well as the aside with which the episode concludes, 'But he was speaking of the Temple of his Body' perhaps should lead us to suggest that what Jesus was about in this incident in the Temple, was not only a 'clean up' job but calling into question the Temple's very meaning and purpose! And I think we would be right to make that suggestion.

In the ancient world the primary understanding of a Temple was that it was the home, the dwelling place of a God. That was also true for the Jerusalem Temple, in both its earliest building by Solomon and in its later reconstructions it was understood to be the dwelling place of the God of Israel. As a mark of honour for the deity the Temple, any temple, was made as beautiful as possible: the psalms remind us of this in those glorious lines such as,

' How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God. (Psalm 84)

But there was another side to this picture. One of the key words associated in the Old Testament with God and the Temple is 'holy'. God and holiness are intimately to each other: it is the essential nature of God to be 'holy'. The Temple in turn was seen as holy because it was where God dwelt. But – and this was a vital part of this thought world – the idea of 'holiness' was closely linked to a need for separation – the very Hebrew word for 'holy' QDSH seems to incorporate within its sound the idea of 'cutting off', of separation. God had to be separated from his worshippers, and the worshippers from God, for their mutual protection. To allow God too close to God's people might be dangerous, lethal for them, or perhaps even for God. Hence in the Ancient world the

architecture of a Temple incorporated a number of barriers to ensure this protection... and the closer one got to the Holy of holies, the actual spot where the deity dwelt, the fewer the people that were allowed to approach. So in the Temple in Jerusalem there were points where foreigners could go no further, and then where women could go no further, and then eventually lay men go no further. Finally only the High Priest could approach the innermost sanctuary, an even he only on rare occasions.

Fascinatingly there have even been some warning signs discovered dating from the Temple courtyard in the New Testament period. They were written in Greek and they make the point that foreigners are not allowed to go further in no uncertain terms: "Let no foreigner enter within the parapet and the partition which surrounds the Temple precincts. Anyone caught [violating] will be held accountable for his ensuing death." I think of them as the ultimate non-welcome to a Holy Place sign!

But does, should, God have to be protected in this way? Perhaps that was the ultimate question that Jesus was asking in his actions in the Temple that day.

Beginning with the great proclamation of John 1.14, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of a Father's only Son, throughout the Gospel of John we are being offered the wonderful news that the ultimate dwelling place of God is now not in a building, however holy it might be, but in the living breathing human person of Jesus Christ. And we are also being told that the essential 'holiness' of this God is that he is Love incarnate. And we are being invited to realise that the essential nature of Love means that it cannot will not, be concerned with its own protection, for otherwise it becomes less than love. The loving holiness of Jesus Christ is barrier breaking rather than boundary reinforcing.

Christians and Christianity have always had an ambiguous relationship with 'holy buildings', dating ultimately from this experience and these actions of Jesus. It is notable that when in the fourth century Christians were eventually free to worship publicly in specially erected 'churches' those churches were deliberately built not to resemble ancient temples, dwelling places of deities, but in a form reminiscent of basilicas, the typical building of a Roman town where the community gathered together to do its everyday business, of law and politics, education and commerce. It was an intentional way of saying that now God dwelt not in a building, but in a people, the people who saw themselves as the Body of Christ.

I am not hostile to holy buildings. But I think they can be very dangerous. The final two pictures in my slide sequence depict precisely that site in Jerusalem where that Jerusalem Temple is believed to have stood and where Jesus took that dramatic action. Since the 7th Christian century it has also been a holy place of Islam. There is, I believe, a fairly clear link between the passions of Jews, Muslims and Christians that swirl around that site, and the current tragedy of what is happening in Gaza. There is nothing quite as dangerous as the love that has been perverted by the desire to possess and control, whether of a place or indeed of a person.

I am not hostile to holy buildings. In the Dorset villages in which Alan and I now spend much of our time, there are churches that are several centuries old, and in which the sense of people praying in these places over hundreds of years has left their mark. 'You are here to kneel', said TS Eliot, 'where prayer has been valid'. I do believe that a cherishing for particular places and buildings can and should be a legitimate part of Anglican spirituality and tradition.

It is when a building becomes an end in itself, and its apparent holiness needs to be kept safe at all costs, that the possibility of perversion can arise, and we need to remind ourselves that the heart of the Christian message is of a love that does not seek to protect itself. If God is love then God does not need to be ultimately protected by the safety of a building. At its most fundamental that was the message that Jesus' actions that day in the Temple in Jerusalem were seeking to demonstrate. It was a dangerous message to proclaim. In historical terms I would say that a pretty direct line can be drawn between Jesus' actions in the Temple and the determination of the political and religious authorities of his day to put him to death.

There are several reasons why Alan and I enjoy being involved from time to time with you the Christian community of La Cote. But one of them is undoubtedly the fact that you are a church that does not own a church building yourselves, worshipping instead in this lovely and borrowed building at Gingsins, and in another borrowed building at Divonne. We would be interested to learn from you how you feel the fact of not having your church building has shaped you as a community.

So in my final words I want to echo a thoughtful Marty Haugen song which we will be using as our offertory hymn today, a glorious reminder of the welcoming nature of the house built for love to dwell in, not with physical stones, but with the building blocks of faith, grace, forgiveness, and welcome.

Let us build a house

Where love can dwell

And all can safely live

A place where

Saints and children tell

How hearts learn to forgive

... **Built of hopes and dreams and visions**

Rock of faith and vault of grace

Here the love of Christ shall end divisions

... **All are welcome, all are welcome**

All are welcome in this place