

Sunday 7th March
Sermon by Janice Atfield

A prayer of adoration

Father God, we adore you for your patience with your wayward children;
for bearing with us when our understanding is skewed and our behaviour wrong.

Jesus, we adore you for being with us always, your humanity entwined with ours;
for showing us the way in your life and through the Word.

Holy Spirit, we adore you for working through us despite our failings;
for living in us and enabling us with a strength greater than our own.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are wisdom in our world;
you flow through creation and consciousness.

Our attempts to house you in bricks and mortar are foolish.
Come to us as we gather here within this church made to honour you, and lift the stones
from our hearts, so that we may be your Church in word and in deed.
Amen

READING: JOHN 2: 13-22

Sermon

One of the things that I find fascinating about Victorian times is the interest in séances and the way in which a whole industry evolved to persuade the gullible public to part with their money as they were hoodwinked into believing, through the most ingenious and deceitful methods, that they were in touch with their dearly departed.

Guests would be personally invited: no one was allowed to turn up at the door. This meant that prior research could be done on their background and circumstances - whom they would most likely be seeking.

They would be seated in a pitch – dark room around a brilliantly lit table, making sure that their eyes wouldn't adjust to the darkness behind them. Hands on the table please! No fidgety fingers discovering wires and pulleys under the table.

The medium would pack her cheeks with strips of cheesecloth to emerge as ectoplasm at the right moment and an assistant would be concealed in the darkness with a supply of

feathers or petals to drop silently onto the over – lit table, breathing on bare necks, gently tugging at sleeves.

All these ploys were of huge value to these charlatans, but their biggest asset was that these people wanted to believe: they were vulnerable, lonely, guilty, bewildered: they came trustingly seeking absolution and peace and they were betrayed in the most heartless manner.

Our reading today is the account of how Jesus drove out the stall – holders and the money – changers from the temple forecourt in Jerusalem with much the same sense of outrage and disgust as we might feel at the heartlessness of the fake mediums.

But what was the temple to Jesus? Why should he be so upset? A little further on in John's gospel, Jesus tells the woman at the well that soon people will not need a temple to worship in for they will worship God in the temple of the heart – in spirit and in truth. In his ministry he is at pains to point out that sacrifices and priestly intervention will no longer be needed and that trust and faith in HIM will be the new way to worship.

And this is the point: the people who came to the temple to worship came because it was where they believed that they met the God in whom they had faith and trust – where the holy and incorruptible one dwelt and yet they were met at the door by swindlers and profiteers.

What do you think would be the one revelation that would scupper the Christian faith? Maybe the discovery of a tomb containing a body which was proved to be Jesus? No, I don't think so: that would not be terminal – a crisis, certainly, but proof of the risen Christ is found in the heart as well as in the Gospel narrative. Christianity would recover.

But our faith WOULD collapse if Jesus were proved to have been dishonest:- to have lied or misled or to have offered or accepted bribes.

In fact, the whole cosmos would collapse, its whole stability gone because if, in the beginning was the word and the word was God and God was dishonest, then structure and order and reliability would be impossible and we who have staked our salvation on the integrity of God will have built our house upon sand.

The whole salvation story is of how God has dealt with the fall of humanity and we fell when we chose to live by deceit. The serpent fooled Eve who then duped Adam who tried to deceive God and so the deceitfulness rolled on down the human generations until we were so mired in dishonesty that we even deceived ourselves. And over time we have become separated from God, who is truth, justice and integrity.

So Jesus came to show the human race how to live without lies and to remind us that we are made in the image of God who is utterly trustworthy. God's nature is purity and integrity.

And so we can begin to understand why Jesus was so incensed when he found that those who came to seek out and worship this holy, steadfast God at the temple had to run the gauntlet of cynical cheats and exploiters.

Lent begins with our accompanying Jesus in the Wilderness, being witnesses to his temptations and what we find is that Jesus rejected the innate dishonesty of human nature which would have brought him spectacular results, but would not have led people into a relationship with God.

He rejected the cynicism of giving them what they wanted to ensure their support; he rejected the showmanship which would build up a cult of superhero around him and he rejected the myth that violence would keep them loyal to his cause.

Instead, he told all who would listen, the eternal, unwavering truth, that the way to full humanity is through love and service and suffering, and many chose not to hear.: but, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God.

How easily we take for granted the trustworthiness of God, and yet we have staked everything upon it. That trust is so fundamental that we fail to notice it much of the time: we never question it : it is there. God keeps his promises.

In our cussed, contrary human way, we may sometimes wish that he didn't – when we find that following Jesus of Nazareth is as tough as he said it would be and seems to involve more loss than gain, more turmoil than peace, but ultimately, when we have pushed through the hawkers and the charlatans that heckle at the heart's door, and have found ourselves in the presence of this holy and incorruptible God, we find, as written in the letter to the Hebrews;-

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul – a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain where Jesus has entered.

Prayers of intercession

In the name of the one who came to cleanse the Temple,
we pray for the institutions by which we organise our society:
for churches and chapels and house groups;
for educational establishments;
for places of healing, law and order, commerce and recreation.
**May they serve the greater good,
and adapt to the changing needs of the time.**

In the name of the one who came to redeem the world,
we pray for those institutions by which we regulate global relations:
for governments and rulers, democracies,
monarchies and dictatorships;
for bodies that regulate trade, diplomacy
and the balance of peace;
for environmental, development and welfare organisations.
**May they serve the greater good,
and adapt to the changing needs of the time.**

In the name of the one who came to save us from ourselves,
we pray for those institutions we have in our lives:
for our friends, families and colleagues;
for our local communities;
for the church communities to which we belong.
**May they serve the greater good,
and adapt to the changing needs of the time. Amen.**

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