

PSALM 19 verses 1 - 14

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.

³ They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.

⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

¹³ Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

JOHN 2 verses 13 - 25

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.' 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.

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

“CLEARING OUT TIME”

READING: *John chapter 12 verses 13 25*

There is an old tale from India about a snake that lived on a path on the way to a famous temple. Many people would walk along the path to worship, and the snake would often bite people with his poisonous bite. Once a swami (holy man) was on his way to the temple and the snake jumped out to bite him, but before the snake could bite him the swami put the snake into a trance and ordered him to stop biting people. "It is not right to bite people with your poisonous bite," the swami told him. "From now on, you shall not bite anyone." A few months later the swami was passing that way again, and he noticed the snake lying in the grass beside the path, cut and bruised and in an awful state. "Whatever has happened to you, my friend?" the swami asked. "Since you have put your spell on me," the snake explained, "I have been unable to defend myself. Give me back my bite."

"You foolish snake," the swami answered. "I told you not to bite anyone. But I never said that you couldn't hiss!"

In our reading from John's gospel we see an angry Jesus, and it is somewhat refreshing, since we are so used to thinking of Jesus as "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" as the hymn describes him. If Jesus did not bite in this passage, he did surely hiss, and the question we should ask about this passage is - why? Why did Jesus get so angry? What was going on in the temple to provoke this rather different reaction of Jesus?

It might help us to answer this question if we remember what the purpose of the Temple was - to provide a means and a place where people may come into contact with God, and experience his grace and his love. Temples, and places of worship are places where people go to give thanks to God for all that he has done and to ask for forgiveness for their sins; they are places where they go to hear God's word, and receive guidance for their lives, and the Temple in Jerusalem was no different. It was built to be a place where the faithful could go to experience God. It was built for their sake as a special place for them to go to hear His word and to experience His grace and forgiveness and to reflect upon His love and goodness. The temple represented God's presence, amongst His people, his availability to all who sought him, his love for all who called upon him. But something happened to this good place. Something happened to turn it into a place where it became difficult to hear God and experience his goodness.

The Temple in Jerusalem was a place where, in accordance with the law of God as handed down through Moses, people offered sacrifices. Sacrifice was, and is, an important component of the life of faith. Sacrifice reveals the depth of our sincerity. It shows that we put God and what he asks of us ahead of our own needs, ahead of our own prosperity. The law of Moses stated what kinds of sacrifices should be made at the temple, and as we know, before Christ some of those sacrifices, but not all, involved animal sacrifices. Parts of the flesh of the animals sacrificed would be offered wholly to God, other parts would be given to the priests to support them and to provide resources for the poor and needy of the community. Often religious duty required that you bring a young male sheep, or a goat kid, or a pair of pigeons to the temple, where it would then be sacrificed by the priests for you.

In the countryside this had been fairly easy to do as people had sheep or goats or pigeons right at home on the farm. But in Jesus' day, as in ours, people living in cities or town didn't keep those kind of animals hanging around their homes. So when you went to the Temple to make your sacrifice, the Temple authorities made it easy for you by having animals for sacrifice, on sale right there on the premises. The only catch was that you had to use temple coins to make the purchase. If you didn't have temple currency available to make the purchase, well, to help you, you could change your Roman money into Temple money right there in the Temple's outer courtyard; just another small service the Temple authorities provided to make things easier for you. The Temple of Herod in Jerusalem, was your one-stop-Temple - For your salvation, of

course; for your easy access to God. If you look at the money markets in today's world, and are able to understand them, it doesn't take much imagination to see what was happening in the temple courtyard at the time of Jesus.

Our reading tells us Jesus walks into this up-to-date one-stop-Temple, and sees the people selling the cattle and the sheep and the birds. He sees the money-changers at their counters with their fluctuating rates of exchange. He hears the noise, the shouting, the bargaining, the bragging, the bleating and the cooing. He smells the sweat and the dung of the nervous animals. He sees and hears and smells all these things that are there for the sake of the salvation of God's people, and he is furious! We read in **verse 15**, that he makes a whip and lashes out with it, flailing at the deceitful merchants and cheating money changers, turning over their tables and flinging their coins to the ground. He opens the cages and set the birds free. He runs about, chasing the cattle and the sheep and all their owners from the courtyard shouting: "stop this! What have you done! Get these things out of here! You have turned my father's house into a market place. You have made it a den of thieves. Get out, get out!"

Sometimes it takes a fresh eye to see just what we have done to the holy things of God, those things that are meant to help us meet with God. Everything Jesus rejected in the temple was put there, initially, with the best intentions. It was put there to help people who came to the temple to seek God's will for their lives and to thank him for his love. Yet it was wrong. What had started as a good thing, had become evil. The temple had become a place that exploited the need for salvation, rather than a place that enabled it. I saw a comment on Facebook this week, where a renowned Christian author and teacher was advertising a zoom meeting to help people to pray, and was charging for people to have access to it. I agree that costs need to be covered, but one person wrote in response – "praying to God is free. You will go to hell for what you are doing." Now, I am not sure that this angry outburst is in the same category as Jesus's outburst in the Temple – some may agree with the angry person, some with the zoom meeting facilitator.

But I wonder if there are still today some things that provoke Jesus to that kind of anger? I wonder if there are some things that have to be driven out of our lives – "the temple of God's Holy Spirit" and out of the lives of our churches and our communities because instead of bringing us closer to God they prevent us from meeting him?

There is the story of an old man who lay very ill. A friend came to see him, and after talking for a while, asked him, "In your long life, have you any regrets?" The old man's mind was away back in his childhood. "When I was a boy," he said, "I often used to play with my school friends out by the roadside. One day, after my friends had gone away, I found at the corner of the road an old rickety signpost. I twisted it in its socket, so that its arms pointed in the wrong direction. Just today, for some reason or other, I've been wondering how many travellers I sent that day on the wrong road"

How many people today are being sent on the wrong road, not by a child playing a foolish game, but by adults, Christian adults, either misunderstanding or misrepresenting, the Christian faith? Like other aspects of life, we see all around us the commercialization of religion, exploiters who cash in on our needs for forgiveness and a loving word those who ask for money so that God will bless them. Surely, this is a prostitution of the faith, the easiest one to detect and the easiest to criticise. We see them on our television screens. We see their mass marketing - modern merchants in the temple, misrepresenting our faith, steering people down the wrong road, twisting God's word displaying a God who gives success and riches – the propagators of "prosperity Gospel teaching" over God who sides with the weak and suffers with the oppressed. There are some who come to our churches, not to listen for God's guidance, not to thank God, but because they think that if they come, somehow it will ensure them of God's blessings, a lucky charm or gaining "brownie points" to guarantee that on the day of judgement they will be on the right side, standing with the sheep instead of with the goats. They adhere to the bare essentials of God's law, not because it represents God's guidance for our lives, but because they think that if they obey, they will win something. Let's not dismiss completely that whilst there is an element of truth to the

idea that God prospers those who follow his law, there is also a great sadness to the fact that some people keep that law only for what it will gain them.

What do we need to have cleansed from our lives? What ideas and practices need to go if we are to truly meet God in the temples of our own bodies and in our temples of stone, brick and wood? We all have an amazing tendency to take stuff that is good and make it more important and more necessary than it really is, or possibly can be.

What have we taken that is good, and made into our god? Turning it from a thing that brings us closer to salvation, to a thing that becomes a barrier to it? Have we reduced our faith to business and success on one hand, and law and ritual on the other, so that there ends up being nothing different, nothing unique, nothing holy about it? Has our faith become like everything else, some kind of commercial transaction? So many people are misled, seeing faith as a list of do's and don'ts, as a matter of "how big a sacrifice can or should I make to take care of everything?" But what we give the church, or the evangelists, or what we do, in our own strength, to obey God, does not take care of everything. Nor does merely following the Ten Commandments, or even praying in a certain way, take care of everything.

It is the cross of Jesus, and his sacrifice, that takes care of everything. It is the endless love of God - his for us and ours for him. Faith in the work of Jesus at Calvary that saves us, not our rituals. Faith in the resurrection beyond that cross which redeems us, not our inadequate obedience. That is the point of the discussion between Jesus and the authorities after his rampage: when they ask him what sign he will perform to justify his behaviour and he replies: **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (verse 19)**. No-one understood his words then, but later, after the resurrection, the disciples remembered them, and understood. They understood that Jesus was that temple. That in him they met God and talked to God, and experienced God's love and forgiveness. They remembered how he touched people and spoke to them, how he fed the hungry and gave sight to the blind, how he put truth and justice in their right places, and gave peace and joy to those who came near him. They remember these things, and they remembered his words, and they looked at his death and resurrection, and they knew that Jesus was the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

What in our lives prevents us from knowing Him? The power and presence of God is not merely found in the rituals and observances of our churches but in an encounter with the living Christ, an encounter we can only have through faith and trust and openness to the Spirit of the one who is revealed in the pages of scripture and spoken of in our places of worship – whether in buildings, in creation, in great gatherings or solitude. The Temple was symbolic of the presence of God amongst His people and whilst under the Old Testament covenant God was separated from His people by a curtain, in the death of Jesus with the New Testament Covenant, that curtain was ripped open that ALL might have access to the presence of God at all times.

Folks, a long message, but an important one. May our worship be pure and without any other motive than to draw near to God. When we do, His promise to us is that He will draw near to us.