

## **Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney**

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*Rector of St James*

**Third Sunday in Lent**

**7 March 2021**

**Readings:** Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19;  
1 Corinthians 1: 18-25; John 2: 13-22.

*“What does the Lord Require?”*

### **The Jerusalem Temple Scam**

In the words of the archetypical London spiv, Arthur Daly, those who ran the Jerusalem Temple in the time of Jesus were on a ‘nice little earner’.

As holy ground, the Temple authorities forbade anything non-Jewish being present on its more sacred precincts, which included people and things. The merchants and moneychangers that Jesus threw out of the Temple were part of a racket run by the Chief Priests to extort money from the people. It went like this:

- First, to make a sacrifice it was necessary to purchase the offering from approved merchants, who operated in the Temple precincts and paid a fee to the authorities to do so, and
- Second, only special ‘temple money’ could be used in the Temple grounds, so the moneychangers (with substantial commissions) traded temple coins for the Roman ones, which allowed folk to buy their sacrificial offering.

Jesus identified this practice as corrupt. The crowds approved of his stand, but the Chief Priests and scribes saw it as a reason to have him killed. We therefore arrive at today’s Gospel reading and the story of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem.

The Passover was approaching, and business was brisk. It had also become the time for Jesus to reveal the nature of his ministry. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!” he proclaimed, but the religious leaders interpreted his words literally and therefore completely misunderstood the prophecy.

The Temple was intended to be the place where God and humanity met, where sacrifices were made, and where God’s people found forgiveness and reconciliation. Nevertheless, over time it had become a marketplace for the benefit of the Temple leaders. In response, Jesus’ words anticipate the time when God and humanity would meet in a new way on the cross and in the empty tomb; after which the Temple itself would be destroyed, never to return.

The Temple leaders had reduced religion to a matter of trade and empty ritual, sowing the seeds of its demise. God had become a means to an end that resulted in profit and power for the purveyors of piety. In this respect the Temple and its leaders had failed both the people and God long before the Romans finally destroyed the building in 70AD. This is a cautionary tale for all social institutions.

### **The Crucified Christ**

The Gospel of John tells the story of another Temple - the crucified Christ. The writer at this early point is laying the foundation for the new idea of encountering God in the flesh. The prologue, at the beginning of the Gospel, talked of a 'new creation', and John the Baptist's proclamation heralded Jesus as the anointed one of God – the Messiah. But the story became one of a journey to the cross.

St Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth:

*“the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1: 18).

He reinforced this with his later words:

*“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* (1 Corinthians 1: 22-24).

Indeed, it remains a human constant that the cross is a problem for those who put their faith in power, wealth, and status. It makes no sense to those who have a worldly perspective, and who rely upon power to manipulate a system for their own benefit, taking what they want on the one hand and meting out abuse and injustice on the other. This is what the Temple leaders had become – self-interested, impenetrable, and corrupt. But the crucified God changed all that – proclaiming self-giving, transparency, and integrity as the signs of Godliness.

There is no prosperity Gospel on the cross, no easy life, no power brokering. No religious privilege, no hiding behind legal or political chicanery, for the victim is totally powerless and without any means to protect themselves - and this is God's sign?! Yet, St Paul argues that God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

### **How are We to Live?**

So, how are we to live and where might we find justice? The Ten Commandments provide a basis for ordering relationships between an individual, God, and the wider community. Moreover, they are also instructive in the light of the moral dysfunction and failure revealed in the activities of our parliaments over the past weeks.

A rich young man asked Jesus:

*“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

and the response was the summary of the law:

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27)

The ethos of our Judeo-Christian faith focuses on two sets of relationships, worked out in ‘duties to God’ and ‘duties to neighbour’. Both are necessary for living an authentic life under God’s rule. The primary relationship is directed toward God, expressed in the first four commandments, and we maintain them through regular worship, prayer, and contemplation of the Scriptures.

But duty to God extends to our treatment of others. The Christian faith teaches that each person carries the image of God. We affirm this through our understanding that as God’s people ‘we are the body of Christ’ – called to continue Jesus’ ministry of healing and restoration in the world. So how are we to behave in the light of this?

Interestingly, *codes of conduct* can be created out of most traditions, philosophies, beliefs, and cultures, yet they often have common themes. It appears that people have an innate understanding of the values of peace, justice and love that are shared by all humanity – a reminder of the *imago dei* once again!

To this end, I offer three important disciplines that are derived from the Ten Commandments:

1. **Respect:** which concerns our attitudes about other people, (and also ourselves and God). It is about holding a positive opinion of others coupled with appropriate behaviour toward them. Rudeness and abuse, on the other hand, indicates disrespect and a desire to break good relationships.
2. **Integrity:** is derived from the concept of ‘wholeness’. In ethical terms, it refers to the virtue of consistency and principled behaviour patterns that reflect the internal beliefs and understandings of a person. Hypocrisy is understood to be the opposite of integrity, where a person’s behaviour is inconsistent with their stated beliefs or values.
3. **Honesty:** is more than telling the truth. Honesty is concerned with moral outcomes that are open, truthful, and focused on the well-being of others. An honest person therefore does not steal, lie, or cheat, as this would be a denial of the moral good - something worth pursuing for its own sake.

These disciplines involve making choices concerning our interactions with people. They are actions of the will, they reflect our attitudes toward others, and are an experience of God's grace. To behave morally, therefore, is a good thing in and of itself, which draws us closer to God and brings forth justice, love, and peace. In short, moral behaviour is transformative both for the individual and the community - summarised in what is called 'the common good'.

### **All Things New**

Moral failure reminds us of the basic human problem of sin and of our need to seek forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. As St Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

*“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 3: 22b-24)

The important thing is to recognise the wrong and respond to it. Failure to do this can lead to ongoing dysfunction both for both an individual as well as our broader corporate life. The ultimate risk of failing to address brokenness is that dysfunction becomes enculturated, such as happened at the Temple in Jerusalem, and which has appeared in our own times in the churches, in business, and in government.

The leaders failed both God and the people; and the Temple is no more. Part of its demise was because it came to serve vested interests thereby ceasing to be what it was meant to be – a light to the nations and a means of salvation for all people. It is a common problem - let the listener understand!

Lord our God,  
 by your Holy Spirit write your commandments upon our hearts  
 and grant us the wisdom and power of the cross,  
 so that cleansed from greed and selfishness,  
 we may become a living temple of your love;  
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**