

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B**

**John 2.13-22**

**3 March 2024**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**Sam Hole**

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” I wonder what would happen if I used those words to greet Julie – or any of her lovely staff at Café Portico. “Out with your tables and chairs!”, I could declare. “Begone to your oversweet but strangely moreish cakes!” “An end to the weekday smell of bacon wafting through the church during Morning Prayer!”

Perhaps I can indulge my imagination as I prepare to leave Chelsea – and indeed now, for this is my last adventure in this pulpit. It would be easy to make such a café scene the modern equivalent of John’s story of Jesus in the Temple. In John’s telling, in that large, grand precinct the sound of quiet chatter is suddenly replaced by that of coins clattering on the stonework, of wooden tables smashing and cracking, of doves thrashing about in their cages and sheep bleating with shock as this man, fired by anger, rails against the enterprises that flourish in that most holy space. I suspect those looking on in Jesus’ day were just as shocked as we would be, right now, if we heard similar crashing coming from our narthex.

But all this is in my imagination. I am, I want to be clear, a huge supporter of all that Café Portico brings to our church. How else could we provide a friendly personal welcome to visitors, or afford to keep the church open safely all day? How important it is that, in the heart of Chelsea, patients and visitors to our nearby hospitals can find somewhere affordable to talk.

And that pondering of our café is a reminder that it is hard to imagine quite what would be involved in making a church that was a space of, say, pure holiness. As part of our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, Louisa Price has put together a team who have been expertly researching the people named in the monuments on our walls. And what they are finding speaks of the great diversity of human life. There [north wall] is the memorial to George Clark, for 44 years chaplain to the children of the Royal Military Asylum on Duke of York Square. Over there [south wall] is Martha Gammell, by profession a dancer and actress, who had eight children with the soldier Andrew Gammell, and yet never seems to have married him. And near her [south wall] is William Segulier, the first keeper of the National Gallery, and yet known today in art circles both for his ‘incompetence’, and for his ‘passion for brown varnish’.<sup>1</sup>

And with an eye to contemporary concerns there is also a grimmer side to what is remembered in this church. There are, perhaps unsurprisingly, memorials to those who benefited financially from slavery. And, in a similar vein, at the London Metropolitan Archives currently you can see a small exhibition called ‘Unforgotten Lives’. Its researchers have sought out the names of the non-white people recorded in the registers of London’s Anglican churches. Their research for St Luke’s ends at the year 1823, so only covers services at what we now call Chelsea Old Church. But they have uncovered the records of 54 people explicitly identified as non-white, with I am sure more baptised and buried here at the new St Luke’s in the decades after. That number in part reflects London’s position as a global metropolis. But the oldest of them is a baptism from 1598 – the 13<sup>th</sup> February to be precise. It simply reads: ‘Charles. A boy, by estimation

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<sup>1</sup> From his Wikipedia listing: The William Blake scholar Ruthven Todd tells us that at the National Gallery Segulier "established a reputation both for incompetence and for a passion for brown varnish, apparently agreeing with Sir George Beaumont, connoisseur and amateur artist, that a really good picture should have the color of a Cremona violin".

10 or 12 years old. Brought by Sir Walter Raleigh from Guyana.<sup>2</sup> It sends a shiver down my spine to think of that small boy, torn away from his homeland, facing an unfamiliar ritual beside a wintry Thames.

The church is a mixed community. It has been caught up in some of the great acts of our British past, as well as entangled in some tides of history that brought misery to millions.

When Jesus sets out the Temple precinct with his whip of cords, we might well hear a desire for an renewed purity in our worship and life together. ‘Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ – or, as Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus say: this place is a ‘den of robbers’, when it should be a ‘house of prayer’ (Matt 21.13; Mark 11.17; Luke 19.46). And that call to renew our worship is crucial. We need every now and again to recover what is fundamental to what we do together, in our act of bringing ourselves before the living and loving God. That’s part of our annual task in Lent, the spring clean that clears away the cobwebs and straightens up the furniture of our soul. But it can also happen on a grander scale, as in the ways the Reformation (so wonderfully covered for us in last week’s Lent Talk) was in part a decluttering of centuries of religious practice. Strip off the layers of paintwork; let’s get back to the original wood.

But in John, there’s something else going on when Jesus enters the Temple. Yes, Jesus’ words are an appeal for a new holiness in his Father’s house. But John expands the scene to include a new emphasis. The Temple will soon be no longer. The true site where humanity and God will come together will be in the body of Christ, God incarnate.

This is an important point. It is, though, one on which we need to be very careful.<sup>3</sup> It would be all too easy to use this passage to reinforce

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<sup>2</sup> Fully: ‘Charles A boy by Estimacon [Estimation] x. or xii yers olde [10 or 12 years old] brought by Sir Walter Rawlie [Sir Walter Raleigh] from Guiana [Guyana].’ 13 Feb 1598. Baptism.

<sup>3</sup> cf David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John*, (2021), pp.78-81

centuries of Christian prejudice against Jews. In that reading: the physical Jewish Temple is removed, and a new spiritual one is created in its place. But remember that John is writing decades after the destruction of the Temple. In the Judaism of John's day, Rabbinic Judaism was already emerging as the dominant force, with its ethos centred on the teaching of the Rabbis. For the readers of John's day, the choice was not between the Temple or Jesus: it was a question of where the heart of worship lay now that the Temple was no more. And John puts this passage right at the start of his book – straight after the wedding at Cana – because he wants to say: the heart of worship is in Jesus. It is in his body – born, abused, crucified, resurrected – that we encounter the depths of the reality of God. Hear this, says John, in the stories I am about to tell. Let me tell you a story of an expanded household of faith, of law and commandments summed up in a living Word, of the promises of the Temple fulfilled in a new way. And then live it out in your lives, as the body of Christ on earth. It won't be perfect. But it will be a way of truth and life.

We don't gather here each Sunday as a community of the perfect. In that we're nothing new. We are surrounded by memories of our ancestors in the faith. Some point the way more clearly than others; all knew the challenges of living amidst the ambiguities of this world. As the hymn puts it, 'they wrestled hard, as we do now, / with sins and doubts and fears.' God knows, in my short four and a half years here I have done so too. Yet I would rather be on no other journey. And I cannot think of better companions to journey with than you all. Thank you for all you have shown me of the mysteries of God and God's world. So like the disciples we journey on together, following in the footsteps of Christ, and trusting that God's wisdom will take us home.