

Removing Barriers to God

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Date: 08 March 2015

Preacher: Bishop Julian Dobbs

[0:00] Amen.

Amen. Well here we have Jesus.

Going to worship in the temple. And becoming enraged. Cross. Angry. Taking hold of the things that were before him.

He said do not make my father's house a house of trade. Making a whip of cords he drove them out of the temple. The sheep the oxen pulled out the coins of the money changers.

I said to Brenda this morning as we were reading the passage. Just imagine what it must have been like in that Jerusalem temple that day. Because that's where our gospel passage locates us.

[1:19] In the great temple in Jerusalem. The spiritual center of all Judaism. Here is Jesus in the temple. Finding the entire temple.

A place which had been set aside. As we set this place aside already today. A place that had been set aside by almighty God. Had been corrupted.

And turned into a spiritual obstacle course. Blocking the view of worship and forgiveness. Not just for individuals. But in the Jerusalem temple.

For the entire nation and people of Israel. And I wonder as Father Brian read. Did you feel something of our Lord's indignation in this gospel reading?

Indignation that ordinary people just like me and you. Should be cheated out of an authentic relationship with God.

[2:14] By the hijacking of holy worship for their own personal gain. If you've got Bibles with you. You can open them if you would to John chapter 2.

As your bishop let me tell you. I find Bibles a lot better open than they are closed. I'm sure you would agree. John chapter 2. If you've got an electronic version like mine.

You can open that as well. So long as you don't send me emails while I'm preaching. I said that in one of our parishes recently. And somebody did exactly that. In fact it was at Church of the Apostles.

Only at Church of the Apostles in Virginia. Where Father Brian came from. Would somebody tweet something to the bishop while he was preaching. Well this account of John chapter 2.

It's reported here. Taking place in the very early. stages of Jesus' public ministry. Whereas the other gospels record it happening at the end of the Lord's earthly ministry.

[3:13] Most Bible commentators agree that there were two such dramatic instances by Jesus in the Jerusalem temple. John has it here at the beginning. That's significant. We'll look at it.

Others have it at the end. Because remember. Jesus made several visits to Jerusalem. Not just on this occasion. Here in chapter 2. But if you look in John's gospel.

Also in chapter 5. And then in chapter 7. And again in chapter 10. He made these visits to Jerusalem. And I encourage you to study those visits this week.

In your own personal Bible study. But here in our passage. Very early on. In his earthly ministry. We have Jesus visiting Jerusalem. He comes to pay a personal visit.

To the heart of all Jewish life for centuries. And that is the temple at Jerusalem. The temple was central. It was vital.

[4:09] To be at the Jerusalem temple. Was to be at the heart of the nation. To be at the heart of religious life. Not unlike Anglicans.

Who make a pilgrimage. To Canterbury Cathedral. In England. If you've been there. It was in a sense what was happening. The great pomp and circumstance of Canterbury Cathedral.

Picture it in your minds. Or a visit to St. Peter's Square in Rome. Or perhaps we could say. Not unlike the bishop's visit. To Holy Trinity Syracuse.

When I make an Episcopal visit. To one of our diocese's 31 congregations. An important part of what I am doing as your bishop. Is coming to watch over the life of the church. Together with the rector. That is my responsibility. As your bishop. And I like to know.

[5:09] How is the worship? How's the teaching? How's the discipleship? How's the leadership? And yesterday I met with your wardens. And then with your rector. To discuss these very important matters.

I take this responsibility. I take this responsibility very seriously. In my Episcopal ministry as a bishop. I believe that I'm responsible before God.

For the deacons and priests and bishops and congregations. That God has entrusted to my care. And that was happening in a sense. In some sense.

When Jesus began to visit the central place of worship in Jewish life. Here he is visiting the temple. What was happening? He wanted to know.

Were the priests fulfilling their biblical responsibility? As outlined in the scriptures. Did they have a concern for the spiritual welfare?

[6:02] For the congregation or the temple worship? What was going on? What was happening to the flock of God's people. That were gathered at the temple that Passover time.

This was the Father's house. And Jesus. The great shepherd of the sheep. Was concerned about what was going on. What was happening there?

That Passover day. When Jesus came into the temple. What was it? That truly provoked Jesus to respond. In such a dramatic way.

And let me assure you as the bishop. I find no means at Holy Trinity Syracuse. To respond in the same way Jesus did. When he made his visit to the temple. I'm so encouraged by the life of the ministry here.

Under Father Brian's leadership. But look with me. Look with me back to our passage. If you have it there. John chapter 2. In verses 14 to 16. First of all. Three things I want to share with you this morning.

[7:02] Firstly. Access to God. Was being obscured. Would you say obscured? Obscured. It was being obscured.

The religious leaders were obscuring the way to God. And Jesus was angry. He was concerned. Where was the prayer? Where was the quiet worship?

Where? Where? Banished. To the sidelines. With the competing noises of bleating sheep. And rattling cash registers. And mooing oxen.

And bargaining. And shoving. And dealing. And negotiating. Pat and Raymond came on the Bishop's Bible Tour to Israel last year. We're taking another tour this year. You might like to come. You experience this exact event. When you go into the Arab Shoup. The Arab markets of Jerusalem. The noise is outstanding. The negotiating.

[7:56] The dealing. The rattling. The completing noises. It's there. Even to this day. And all of this. Was a very distant and far cry.

From what we read in the Old Testament books. Of Ezra. And Nehemiah. About the rebuilding of this shattered temple. And the subsequent joy.

And yet weeping. And prayers of the people. As they read. And responded. To the word of God. Jesus found something rather different.

The temple had become. We could say. A mixture of. Wall Street stock exchange. And the Chelsea market. In Manhattan. The noise was deafening. The bargaining was intense.

Where was God? Where was he? And his saving love. And it's not only the Jews. Of that first century Passover.

[8:50] Who from time to time. Obscured access to almighty God. Sometimes we. Even we. Anglican Christians. Can obscure.

Can obscure. And complicate the gospel. Overlaying it with rules. And conventions. And ceremonies. And robes. And vestment. And smoke. And bells. You don't do so much of the smoke and bells here.

Dull worship. And irrelevant sermons. Sometimes that happens. Even in our Anglican churches. To quote Anglican author Dorothy Sayers. His enemies.

His enemies crucified him. It was left to his disciples. To make him dull. In a certain church. The rector was droning on and on.

Not like your rector. But a certain rector. Was droning. On and on and on. In the sermon. And a little girl tugged at her mummy. And said impatiently. Mummy. Pay the man.

[9 : 45] Would you? And let us go home. I think that must have been the attitude. Of many bewildered worshippers. That Passover.

In the Jerusalem temple. Let's get it over and done with. And let's just go home. We've paid our duty. Let's move on. And there was Jesus.

Coming into that environment. Consumed in his messianic role. With zeal for God and his people. Whom he had come to save. Consumed with the purity of the father's house.

And suddenly. Can you picture it in your mind? So now your imagination to work here. Tables are overturned. Animals are driven out. Crawling and scattering in every direction.

Rolling everywhere. And look at the Lord's exclamation. In verse 16. Look with me. If you've got your Bibles open there. It's a powerful, powerful verse. Take these things away.

[10 : 41] Take them away. Do not make my father's house. A house of trade. And anyone who knew their scriptures. Would surely, surely.

At that moment. Be thinking back to the last book of the Hebrew scriptures. To the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi. In his prediction of the coming Messiah. Listen chapter 3 of that prophecy. Then suddenly. Says Malachi. The Lord you are seeking. Will come to his temple. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?

This is no simple protest visit of a country prophet from Galilee. No. This is the Messiah. On a day of prophetic fulfillment. Visiting the Jerusalem temple.

Sweeping everything out before him. In an act of divine demolition. Because God had been obscured. You see brothers and sisters at Holy Trinity.

[11 : 43] God will not have it. He will not stand. For anyone. Or anything. Obscuring the way to God's salvation message. Of peace and goodwill.

He will not do it then. He didn't stand for it in Jerusalem. And he will not stand for it now. Amen. Let me be as clear as I can. This Sunday and Lent.

This morning. As we journey towards Holy Week. And the Good Friday cross. And I shared this with the clergy. In our clergy call last week. There is no other way. To God.

Except through Jesus Christ. Even the disciplines of Lent. Good though they may be. Brothers and sisters. Will do us no good at all.

As far as our salvation is concerned. Adding good works to faith. Is an end time strategy. Of Satan. The devil always tries to add.

[12 : 39] An element of good deeds. And hard work. And even spiritual discipline. To salvation. And when you boil down. All the teachings of cults. And other religions.

They all add an element. Of salvation. Through good works. I am not saying. Your good works don't matter. Of course they matter. Your service for the gospel. Your ministry in the church.

Your reaching out to the poor. The refugees. As you do in this congregation. But I am saying. As far as your salvation is concerned. Your good works will not. Help you.

One little bit. Why? Our sister read to us. That wonderful passage. Which always reminds us. Just how much we need. God's forgiveness. Out of Romans chapter 7.

Why? Because we in ourselves. Are never good enough. If you add good works. To salvation. How many good works. Do you have to do. Before you are saved? Where do you draw the line?

[13 : 36] Wretched man that I am. Wrote St. Paul. Wretched man that I am. I do the very things. I do not want to do. And Paul's underscoring for us. As he wrote to the church of Rome.

The need. For God's grace. And forgiveness. In our lives. Jesus was clear. God did not send his son in the world. To condemn the world. But in order that the world might be saved. Through whom?

Through him. And through him alone. There is no other way. And when the way of the Lord. Whether it be in the Jerusalem temple. Or in this wonderful new building.

That the Lord has blessed you with. At Holy Trinity Syracuse. In my life or yours. When the way of the Lord. Is deliberately obscured. By God's people. The anger of the Lord.

Is revealed. And so here we are. In the Jerusalem temple. Access to God. Was being obscured. Secondly. The way to God.

[14 : 36] Was being exploited. Would you say exploited? Not only obscured. But the religious leaders. Were exploiting. Notice. For their own benefit.

Verse 14. Look. The money changers. Or those who are exchanging money. We're getting the picture here. Here is Jesus. In the temple. Disturbed. That the religious leaders. Are exploiting the way to God. In Jesus' day. All the Jews. Over the age of 19. Were required to pay the temple tax. For rituals and sacrifices.

That were being performed. In the temple. The tax was equal to about. Two days wages. Was quite a lot of money then. And it would be a lot of money for us. But here was the scheme.

Here's what was going on. The temple authorities. Insisted. That the tax had to be paid. Either in Galilean shekels. Or in the temple currency.

[15 : 32] All the other currencies of the day. The Roman currency. The Scythian currency. Egyptian. Or whatever else it was. Were regarded as unclean. Silver coins from Greece.

Coins from Rome. Had to be changed. By the money changes. In the temple courts. So that you could buy your sacrifice. And when you came to pay. As you do in Jerusalem today.

As you came to pay. You had to pay a commission. To get your non-Jewish money. Changed into Jewish currency. And the commission historians tell us.

Was a rather high percentage. The annual income. From this temple tax alone. Amounted to millions. It was said. When Crassus captured Jerusalem.

In 54 BC. He took from the temple. The equivalent of millions of dollars. Without even beginning. To empty its coffers. So there we are.

[16 : 29] The sellers of animals. That were being used. For their own sacrifices. Many worshippers. Would bring their own animals. From their own farms. For the sacrifices. But they knew the law.

Required that an animal. Had to be unblemished. And without sickness. And however. The important expectors. Who would expect the animals. Before. They were presented.

For sacrifice. Would always find. Some blemish. In those animals. They were determined about this. And the worshippers. Would be directed. To one of the temple booths. To acquire another animal.

For which the price. Would be as much as six times. What they may have paid. In the surrounding countryside. Of Jerusalem. It was religious. Exploitation.

At its worst. Genuine. Worshippers of God. Exploited. By religious officials. In order to worship God.

[17 : 23] Despicable. It was. Despicable. Not unlike. The immensely. Popular. Prosperity churches. Across our country.

Last week. I was reading about a church. Won by a controversial. Multi-millionaire. African preacher. Who's been accused. Of cynical. Exploitation. Same phrase.

After. Its British branch. Received. Sixteen point. Seven million. It's about 25 million. U.S. Dollars. In donations. From followers. Who were told. That God would give them.

Riches in return. Followers. Were ferried. Into double-decker. Shuttle buses. To church. Handed slips. Inviting them. To make debit card payments.

And were told. Obeying the church's ministry. Would make them. Immune. From illness.

Despicable. Despicable. The pastor.

[18 : 19] Has an estimated. 140 million dollar fortune. A fleet of private jets. And a Rolls Royce Phantom. What are those. Who deliberately.

Exploit God. The Holy Spirit. In order. To gain popularity. And status. I read. Very recently. Of a popular.

North American ministry. That teaches. God. The Holy Spirit. Will move in our midst. If we hit a tuning fork. At 528 megahertz. Despicable.

Exploitation. At its worst. Nothing about repentance. Nothing about Christ. Nothing about the cross. And many. Many. North Americans. Including Anglicans.

Are fooled. Certainly. We are desirous. Of God. The Holy Spirit. To indwell our lives. But never through manipulation. Amen. I hope you're more certain.

[19 : 17] Than that. Amen was. Christian work. Does cost money. Yes it does. Let us not forget that. It costs money. To run this church. And to buy it. In our diocese. But our Christian experience.

Is that giving of money. Is a product. Of the gospel itself. And the grateful lives. Of those who give. Regularly. And sacrificially. And cheerfully. Not through exploitation. And manipulation.

So then. Two reasons. For our Lord's reaction. That day. In the Jerusalem temple. The religious leaders. And the authorities. Of the temple. Were obscuring. The way to God. And secondly. They were. Exploiting. The way to God. For their own. Personal gain. And finally. Look with me. In our passage. They were attempting. To destroy. The way. To God. We see this. By their reaction. To the presence. Of Jesus. In the temple. If you have your Bibles. Look with me. In verse 18. Of John chapter 2. [20 : 15] Jesus is just. Very dramatically. In a sign. Of his messianic authority. Driven out. The money changers. Overturned. The tables.

Of the temple. And what happens? Verse 18. The Jews demand. A sign from him. They say. Verse 18. So the Jews. Said to him. What sign. Do you show us.

For doing these things? Hadn't he just. Showing them the sign. Of his messianic authority. Where had these leaders been? Jesus answered them.

Destroy this temple. And I will raise it up again. In three days. And the Jews. Said to him. It has taken. Forty six years. To build this temple. And you will raise it up.

In three days. But he was speaking. About the temple. Of his body. And when therefore. He was raised from the dead. His disciples remembered. That he had said this. And they believed the scripture.

[21 : 09] And the word that Jesus. Had spoken. Here's the very sad truth. That was true that day. In Jerusalem. In the temple. And it's just as true today.

In Syracuse. New York. Shall I tell you what it is? Yes. I'm glad you asked. The critics of Jesus Christ.

Then. And now. Will never. Accept his messianic authority. His actions. Or his judgments. And they will always say. Then. And now.

Who do you think you are? Give us credentials. For your authority. And let me tell you why. That's true then. And it's true today.

The world today. Is tolerant. Of everything. Except the intolerant claim. That Jesus Christ. Is the only Lord.

[22 : 06] Who requires. Our allegiance. And our submission. What were his credentials? What was our Lord's reply? Verse 19.

It's an enigmatic reply. Destroy this temple. And I'll raise it up. In three days. And some years later. Again in Jerusalem.

But this time. At his trial. These words of Jesus. Were misrepresented. By a false witness. Against him. Jesus was not speaking. About the magnificent. Physical structure. Of the stone temple.

In Jerusalem. Part of which. Remains to this very day. Jesus was speaking. Of his own self. The temple of his body. That would be crucified. On the cross. And raised up again.

Three days later. That first Easter Sunday morning. The Jerusalem temple. Represented the one place. Where God. Where the holy God.

[23 : 00] Would meet with sinful human beings. And tragically. The religious leaders. Had obscured. And exploited. The integrity of worship. In the temple.

And now. As Anglican Bishop. Leslie Newbigin says. And I quote. The revered leaders. In the church. The state. The culture. Combine in one murderous intent.

To destroy the holy one. By whose mercy they existed. And were created. You see my dear people of God. Christ's own person.

Shortly to be crucified. In a violent death. And then raised from dead. Is to represent. For all time. The perfect mediation. And intersection.

Between God. And the wretchedness. As St. Paul said. Of our humanity. Works based righteousness.

[23 : 59] Is our default position. As human beings. It's our default position. And yet. And yet. Christ. Christ. And Christ.

Alone. Is the only place. Where we meet with almighty God. The Lord of all the world. Christ is the way. He is the way. What did we sing in our gradual song this morning?

He will hold me fast. He. Is the way. There is no other way. Except through Christ alone. That's why the tables were overturned.

In the Jerusalem temple. The money change is driven out. Access to the living God. Is no longer to be obscured. It's now revealed. In Christ.

And in Christ alone. Access to the living God. Is no longer to be exploited. No. It's now a free gift from God. Through Christ.

[24 : 54] And Christ alone. In Christ. And because of him. Access to almighty God. Can never be destroyed. Because Christ is the only way.

To peace with God. You see my brothers and sisters. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ says. You will never save yourself. And the church will never save you.

Works based righteousness. Will never save you. Religious leaders. Like Father Brian. Good though they may be. Will never save you.

Even your bishop won't save you. He sent Jesus Christ. Who gave himself. For your sins and mine. And brought him back from the dead.

So that you and me. Could be rescued. From trying to earn God's favor. By being good. And keeping rules. And regulations. Surely that's the message.

[25 : 52] From this account. In the Jerusalem temple. Jesus. As the author to the letter of the Hebrews would say. Some 30 to 40 years later. Jesus is the new and living way.

It's him. And with this verse I conclude. Through him. And through him alone. We can draw near to God. With a true heart.

And full assurance. Of faith. Amen. Amen. Amen. I'm reading three books at the moment.

That I draw to your attention. You may consider. As part of your Lenten discipline. Firstly. A Don Carson's book on Jesus. The Son of God. I commend it to you.

It's a tremendous read. I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Carson speak. At the Gospel Coalition meeting recently. Last year at our diocesan synod. We were thrilled to have Bishop Michael Nazari-Ali.

[26 : 54] I almost called him Archbishop then. Perhaps it's a prophetic word from the Lord. Who knows. The Universal and Unique Jesus Christ. By Bishop Michael. I commend it to you.

A stunning book for us to read about Christ in Lent. And then the wonderful, wonderful piece from Anglican author. The late Dr. John Stott. On the incomparable Christ.

I commend those to you. Let us pray. Almighty God. You hate nothing that you have made. And forgive the sins of all who are penitent.

Create in us new and contrite hearts. So that when we turn to you through Christ and Christ alone. And confess our sins. We may receive your full and perfect forgiveness.

Through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.