

May 9, 2010  
**The Gift of Worship**  
John 2:13-22

Imagine the scene in Parliament. The MPs are debating the latest budget and other bills on the parliamentary agenda. The debate is raging. Everyone is nerved up, excited ... it's the biggest moment of the school year.

Suddenly the door of the House of Commons bursts open. In walks a student with a few friends behind him. He comes to one of the MP's desk, piled high with budget papers, party policies, newspapers, etc., he turns the desk upside down, scattering the papers hither and yon. He turns on the astonished MPs and staff, "*This whole place is a disgrace! It's corrupt from top to bottom.*"

That's a crude analogy of what Jesus is up to, here. The original temple, built by Solomon, had been destroyed several hundred years earlier. The present temple, built by King Herod (who wasn't even Jewish) to please his Jewish subjects, was actually the third temple built on the site. And it was by far the most elaborate. Remember that the temple was where the Jewish people believed the presence of God actually dwelt among them.

And, into the temple, comes Jesus. This is perhaps one of the most surprising vignettes of Jesus' life. We are used to seeing Jesus as a teacher, Jesus as a healer, Jesus as a non-violent, suffering Saviour. We are not used to seeing Jesus making whips, overturning tables in a marketplace, and driving people out of places! What's it all about?

It's all about worship (believe it or not)!

*Who can worship?*

In Herod's temple, there were several sections. The area at the entrance was open to everyone - whether you were Jewish or non-Jewish, male or female, young or old. But beyond that, certain parts were only open to the Jews (non-Jews were forbidden), some parts only to Jewish men (women were forbidden), other parts only to Jewish men who were priests (lay-people were forbidden), still other parts only to certain priests at certain times of the year. The holy of holies was forbidden to everyone except one priest, once per year.

What had happened was a number of entrepreneurs had taken over the outer court, open to everyone, in order to sell their wares. So there was no longer room for ordinary people to worship in the temple. They couldn't go on to the other courts, because those were forbidden. The one place they could go was full of merchants - and not very honest merchants at that - peddling their wares: "*the Scriptures declare,*" says Jesus, "*My Temple will be called a place of prayer for all nations, but you have turned it into a den of thieves*" (Mark 11:17)

God's vision for worship is that *all* people, regardless of race, gender, or age should come and worship Him! *"My blessings are for Gentiles, too,"* says the Lord, *"when they commit themselves to the Lord. Do not think that I consider them second-class citizens ... I will bring them also to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations. For the Sovereign Lord, who brings back the outcasts of Israel, says, 'I will bring back others, too, besides my people Israel'"* (Isaiah 56:3-8). In God's vision, everyone can come and worship!

Jesus is clearing away the clutter so that there was room for anyone and everyone to come and worship at the temple. And in doing so He was beginning a process of breaking down all the barriers in the temple - it would end with the tearing of the curtain hiding the holy of holies itself (Mark 15:38). Jesus did not distinguish between Jew and non-Jew, between the "religious" and the non-religious, between saints and sinners, between men and women, between those who were physically healthy and able and those who were ill or physically challenged, between adults and a children. He spoke with them all. He taught them all. He touched them all. He loved them all.

The Jewish authorities - and his own disciples - were shocked! But Jesus knew that the walls in that a temple were about to fall down - and with them their artificial barriers. As Paul would summarize it later: *"There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28).

### *How do we worship?*

Part of the problem with these entrepreneurs in the temple was that there was no room left for (ordinary) people to worship. The bigger problem was they were desecrating the temple of the Lord with their business. The problem was not, necessarily, that any business at all was transacting in the temple. The problem was the type of business, and how it was being transacted.

Part of the Jewish worship system was that people would bring animal sacrifices as part of their prayers for the forgiveness of sin. But apparently it was no longer good enough to bring your own. You had to have the right kind of animal, right kind of offering, even right kind of money - all bought at a good profit for the seller, of course! The temple had become "a den of thieves." Centuries earlier, God had commanded Jeremiah to go the temple and prophesy from the Lord: *"Do not be fooled by those who repeatedly promise your safety because the Temple of the Lord is here. I will be merciful only if you stop your wicked thoughts and deeds and are fair to others; and if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, widows, and if you stop your murdering, and if you stop worshipping idols ... Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and worship Baal and all those other new gods of yours, and then come here and chant, "We are safe!" - only to go right back to all those evils gain? Do you think this Temple, which honors my name, is a den of thieves?"* (Jeremiah 7:1-11). These entrepreneurs were doing the same thing, still!

One of my favorite stories is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector - two people who come to worship God (Luke 18:9-14). It is a story of how God honors the worship of the humble, repentant person who comes, despite his sin and shortcomings, acknowledging his total dependence upon God. The tax collector knows he is not worthy of God's forgiveness. And he returns home "justified before God" - forgiven! The Pharisee comes into God's presence, quite unrepentant, quite self-confident, quite sure He does not need to change anything! He comes, chants, "I am safe," and goes out again. Yet like those self-righteous folks in Jeremiah's day, God did not honor him.

Jesus insists that worship is for those who come into God's presence, humbly, recognizing their sin, knowing they need God. Rich and poor are all welcome. It is a matter of spiritual poverty - recognizing we need God. It is particularly wicked when people are taught they can only be forgiven if they pay money!

### *A whole new temple ... or not?*

The Jewish authorities were more than a little upset with Jesus! But something in his words and actions must have pricked a raw nerve, because they didn't just throw Him out. Something in their consciences goaded them to ask, *"If you have this authority from God, show us a miraculous sign to prove it"* (John 2:18). Jesus answered, *"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."* (John 2:19). The Jewish leaders thought He was referring to Herod's temple. But John explains, "by 'this temple' Jesus meant his body" (John 2:21).

In a sense, Jesus was more of a "temple" than the Temple itself. Because Jesus was fully God and fully human (John 1, Colossians 1:15-23): "God in all His fullness" does dwell in Jesus.

But, as we noted last week, we - the church (the people, not the building!) - is now also God's temple, because God, through the Holy Spirit, lives in us: *"Don't you (plural) realize that all of you (plural) together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you (plural)? God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you (plural) are that temple."* (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). We, the people of God, who believe in Jesus as Saviour, the church, are the "body of Christ" (Colossians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 12), and God's Spirit lives in us. So we are the new Temple! And to this temple all are welcome - regardless of race, gender, ability, age, wealth, etc. All that is required is the humility to realize we need Jesus as our Saviour, and the willingness to receive God's free gift of salvation.

God is now present in each of us, personally. God is found in each of us. We are each temples of God. *"Do you not know,"* asks Paul, *"that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price."* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Literally, the Holy Spirit is God's personal presence is within each of us who believe. The real purpose of our journey through life is to love and to be loved by God. However there are things that, although good in themselves, can be a distraction from that purpose. We are invited to "declutter" our own temples and to keep only the things that really

matter, things that are really worthy and honourable in God's temple - us.

There is one final picture of the temple in Revelation 21:1-27. Notice that in this heavenly city all nations are represented and it is open to all. But also notice there is no temple (v.22). Not even the church is referred to as a Temple. Because here, in heaven, God and people are reunited in the perfect relationship where the Bible started, in Eden. The tabernacle, the temple, even the church, are all human structures pointing toward the glorious time when we will encounter our God, our Saviour, face-to-face, and dwell completely in His presence!

*"Look, the home of God is now among His people! He will live with them and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them ... Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 21:3, 22:20)*

©2010 by Bruce Martin  
First Baptist Church  
1614 - 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
(403) 327-2082  
[bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)