The Cleansing of the Temple
John 2:13-25

We're looking at John's gospel and his account of Jesus clearing the temple. But maybe I can begin by asking you, what makes you angry? What gets you worked up?

Maybe someone cuts you up on the motorway and you can feel the resentment rising. Maybe a colleague at work repeatedly dismisses your ideas or talks down at you. Maybe you see someone else being unjustly treated and it makes your blood boil.

But of course, the actual thing we're getting angry about may just be a surface issue. The deeper issue is that my pride has been hurt, or my will - and what I want to happen - is being obstructed. Or what I care most about is being frustrated or hurt.

So, what gets you worked up says a whole lot about what matters most to you.

So… why is Jesus so worked up in the temple? Because while the text doesn't tell us explicitly that he's angry - it *does* talk about a *consuming zeal* that takes hold of him, and to drive people out with a whip and to physically turn over tables at least implies Jesus is passionate about something doesn't it?

So what is that?

Well, we're going to look at 4 things. How do you encounter God? What stands in the way of that? What clears the way? And what should you do about it?

Encountering God
Look at v13, 'The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.' Now, the Passover's at hand for us as well, it starts tomorrow, on the 15th day of the month of Nisan.

And the Law commanded that three times a year, Jewish men had to go up to Jerusalem to worship God at the great feasts (Deut 16:16). And Passover was one of those feasts.

And as a feast, it's hard to overstate how important it was. Because before the first Passover, the Jewish people were slaves, in Egypt. And not just forced labourers. To keep their numbers down, their male babies were killed - which is genocidal. And to keep their resistance down, impossible production targets were placed on them. And so, as Moses writes in Exodus 1:14, their slave masters '*made their lives bitter*… in all their work they *ruthlessly* made them work.'

Now, however hard your work is, it's better than that. And yet, do you feel free? Do you feel as free as you wish you were? You might not be a slave, but do you feel the weight of having to meet seemingly impossible targets at work? Or do you feel trapped in an impossible situation you can't get out of? Or are you experiencing desires and behaviours you can't seem to get free from - that it's not an exaggeration to say you're addicted or enslaved to?

Or maybe you don't even notice it. Maybe you're trapped in a lifestyle of earn and spend, and earn and spend, and culture expectations, or advertising, or what you see on social media are like slave masters driving you, and you're so caught up in it you can never step back and think, hang on, why am I doing this? Why do I feel so driven to do this? Why is it so difficult to get off the tread mill of consumption? Or living to get people to notice me, or approve of me?

It's why in Romans 6:20, Paul describes humanity as ‘slaves to sin.’ And it’s not just that we as individuals might be enslaved to some particular sin, it’s that sin as a power - through the brokenness of the world, or our families, or the influence of culture, and the messages we consume, can have a controlling and damaging impact on our lives. And sometimes, as with ancient Israel, it can be to the point that it makes life bitter.

But that’s what made Passover so special, because God did not leave them slaves. Instead, every household had to slaughter a lamb, paint its blood on the doorposts of the house, and that night, when the Angel of the Lord passed over Egypt, those under the blood, and covered by its protection, lived, but in every other household, the households of their slave masters, every firstborn son died.

And in the fallout of that first Passover night, the people of Israel walked out of Egypt to meet with God at Sinai, and become his special, chosen, called out, and *free* people.

And yet, Passover wasn’t about *total* freedom but true freedom. You see total freedom - when you’re free to do and live just however you want, and there are no boundaries, no protective walls, always ends back in slavery - to your - or someone else’s- lowest desires. Or, as Paul says, to sin.

Instead, God called Israel into a freedom where they would now be his, and he would be their master, their Lord. And as they lived under his rule, far from life being bitter, it’d be sweet - in a land flowing with milk and honey.

But think: what was going to be central to that life - a life in which they’d flourish? A literal, physical meeting place with God.

And first in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and then in the Temple in Jerusalem, right in the middle of the people was a place where heaven and earth met. Where people could pray, and songs of thanksgiving be sung, and sacrifice be made to atone for sin. And people could meet with God.

I wonder if you realise how much you want that. And I don’t mean a tent or a temple. I mean the freedom and ability to know God and meet with God and thrive as you do. You see, when you experience a moment of transcendence - maybe listening to some piece of music, or out in the mountains and seeing some view, or sat in a beautiful and soaring building, and you feel lifted out of yourself and in that moment you know there’s something more real than yourself and you don’t want it to end, you’re experiencing a hint of it.

Or if you’ve ever wanted a friend, someone who knows you, all 360 degrees of you, and loves you, but you realise no human relationship, however good, is going to do that; Or if you’ve ever felt the grief of saying goodbye to one you loved, knowing you’ll never see them again, and wished the days of goodbyes were over; Or if you realise that sometimes you want what’s good and right but other times what’s bad and wrong, and you wish you weren’t like that, then deep down you’re not just longing for what only God can give you, you’re longing for him.

The problem is there’s all this stuff in the way.

Blocking the Way

And what the Tabernacle and Temple made clear was that people couldn’t simply approach God however they wanted. Instead, a thick curtain blocked their way to the Most Holy Place where

God's glory dwelt. It was like a physical symbol saying, 'No entry. There is an unbridgeable chasm between you and God.'

And yet, as Jesus enters the temple, it's got worse. Look at v14, 'In the temple [Jesus] found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.'

Now, the Old Testament law recognised that in making people come to Jerusalem for the feasts, to also make them bring all the animals they might need for sacrifice would be too great a burden. So instead they could bring money with them, and buy the animals when they got there (Deut 14).

But, of course, by Jesus' day, people would be coming to do that from all over the empire. And they've all got different currencies in their pockets. And so, alongside the sellers of sacrifices, a whole industry of money changers has grown up.

Now, originally, the sellers had pitched their stalls on the Mount of Olives, so that as pilgrims approached Jerusalem they could buy their stuff. But somehow, now, they've migrated inside. And not just inside the city walls, but inside the Temple, and into the court of the Gentiles - the only place where non-Jewish people like you and I could worship.

So picture the scene: let's say you go there to pray, or confess your sin, or enjoy a moment of quiet, or maybe even transcendence, but what you get is cows mooing, pigeons cooing, sheep bleating, and the smell of dung and the clink of coins and the sound of bargaining everywhere.

Now what the other gospels tell us is that towards the end of his ministry, Jesus encountered this scene again. And then what provokes him is the corruption: you've turned my father's house into a den of robbers. But here, Jesus' complaint is not that they're corrupt, it's that they're there at all. Verse 16: "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

And the temple, set apart as holy, where people could meet with God, had been made into a market.

Now, we could read that and see in it an indictment of those who make money from religion, or make the church into a corporate venture. And go to any big religious site and the sale of religious tat and the profiteering from religious junk, is enough to break your heart, or put you off for life.

But there's something else going on here. You see, it's not that all these animals, and their sellers , represent people *breaking* God's law. It's that they're trying to keep it. But that's all they're doing and it's crowded out what really matters.

You see, you can think that if you live the kind of life your culture says you should live - by doing the things they say you should do, and approving of what they approve of, and disapproving of what they disapprove of, and give your money to charity, and make the right sacrifices to atone for your sins, like by offsetting your carbon footprint, then you're good. You've done enough to earn their and God's approval.

But in reality, when we do that, any relationship with God becomes transactional, and we view him like a stall-holder in a market who we pay to supply us with blessing. And yet, as we tick those boxes, the boxes crowd God out. Because if you view your relationship with him as a business arrangement: you do your bit and he'll do his, there'll be no true meeting with him. And you'll

never have assurance that you've done enough, or paid enough, to earn his favour and deserve his love. And when life is hard, you'll think he's punishing you for *not* being good enough - which is crushing. But if life is good, you'll also think it's down to you, but this time that you *are* being good enough, which just makes you proud.

And Jesus comes and says, my Father's house is not a market place. And he's not a stall holder.

And Jesus is passionate about seeing that situation change.

Making a Way
Verse 15, 'And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.'

He could not be clearer could he? This way of doing things is coming to an end. In fact, the prophet Malachi saw this coming 500 years before Jesus did it: 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple… but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire.' (Mal 3:1-3).

But of course, the religious leaders sense the threat. Verse 18, 'So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"'

Think about that. Jesus has just driven people and animals out of the temple with a whip. He's just sent the money-changers flying and their coins with. And they're asking him for his credentials.

Now, they could have just treated him as a rioter, a hooligan, or a trouble-maker. But they don't. Which means that deep down they realise that there is an outside chance that he could be a prophet, and they want proof.

But, if you think about it, that only compounds their guilt. You see, they have enough light to see what's going on, but do they want to? Instead, what they want is a God who dances to their tune, who shows them his qualifications, who gives them a sign.

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, is it possible you're doing something similar? I've got a friend who told me recently that he has asked God on numerous occasions to give him a sign that he's real, that he's there. And, my friend says no sign has come. So God can't be real or there.

But what if God is not a market tradesman, giving you what you want, when you want it? What if God is infinitely above that? What if we must bow to him, not him to us?

So listen to what Jesus says in response, v19, 'Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."' Now, if they had taken him literally, torn down the temple, presented him with the rubble and ruins and said, 'there you go, prove yourself', and he'd rebuilt in three days what had taken them forty-six years to build, it'd be a fair bet that he really did have the authority to say what should, or should not, be going on in the temple.

But they don't take him up on it, and can you blame them? I mean, imagine if someone came to your door claiming to be someone great, and you said, 'sorry, don't believe you, you're going to

have to prove it.' And they said, knock your house down and I'll rebuild it. Or strip your car down and I'll reassemble it, how would you respond?

So their lack of enthusiasm is understandable. But it still leaves Jesus' offer hanging there. What if he could do this? But John makes it clear, that's not what he's talking about. He's got something even greater in mind. Verse 21, 'But he was speaking about the temple of his body.'

So in clearing out the temple, Jesus isn't just declaring that old way of doing things needs revising, or renewing, it's that it's coming to an end. And this stone and mortar temple, where God and man met through sacrifice, was going to be replaced by an even greater one. One this temple had always been pointing to.

And that temple is his body - the ultimate place where heaven and earth, God and man, met. As John said in chapter 1: 'And the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (v1,14). And if all these sacrifices of oxen, sheep, and pigeons, were coming to an end, his was about to take place. His body would be destroyed and three days later raised again.

And when it happened, it happened at another Passover, when the zeal for God's house really did consume him. You see, here he overturns tables sending money scattering across the temple floor, but the time will come when he will be betrayed for money, and when Judas, his betrayer, overcome by guilt, will throw that money on this same temple floor.

And here, Jesus makes a whip and drives out the sacrificial animals, but the time will come when a whip will be taken to him. You see, if the feast of Passover celebrated freedom from slavery, at the cost of a lamb, so at the cross, Christ becomes the ultimate Passover lamb to set us free from everything that enslaves us. He becomes the ultimate sacrifice to atone for our sins. And as his body is destroyed, the curtain that blocked the way in the temple was torn in two, because the barrier to us truly meeting with God was gone.

You see it's in him - in his death and his resurrection - in the destroying of his body and his raising it again - that you can find true freedom, and total forgiveness. And both are free of charge. Because God's house is not a house of trade, it's a place of grace. As John wrote in chapter 1, 'the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

And that means you don't have to pay, or buy, your way into God's favour and you don't have to earn your way into his presence. Jesus has done it for you. And that means when life is not going well, you can know with deep certainty that he loves you and is watching over you, because he died for you, so he's not going to give up on you now. But it also means that when life *is* going well you're not going to get proud. You know any blessing in your life is not because you're so good, it's because God is so gracious.

The question is, is what should you do with that?

Responding to the Way

Well, look at v22 and how his disciples responded, 'When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, *and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*.'

So, when they first heard Jesus say, ‘destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it again’, they didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. It was only after resurrection, as they sat and studied the Bible that they began to understand.

So, if you’re not yet a Christian, think about doing the same. Pick up a gospel and investigate for yourself what the Bible says. And as you do, pray that God would open your eyes to see and understand who Jesus is and what he’s saying.

And if you are a Christian, reflect on how much you’re allowing this book to shape and form you. Because after the resurrection that’s what the disciples allowed it to do, John's saying. And they began to see how all the promises of freedom and forgiveness and drawing near to God, everything the Passover and Temple were pointing to, had come true in Christ. And ask yourself, am I spending time reading and studying it every day, and if not what changes do I have to make to see that happen?

But secondly, John says that as they did that, they believed. They trusted. And every day you’re bombarded by different messages telling you - pursue total freedom, be your own master, or this is what’s wrong with you and this is how to atone for your mistakes, or this is makes for the good life. And you’re going to believe one message or another about all that. And John is saying, true freedom is found in Christ and it comes as you believe what he has to say about himself and about you.

You see, in v23-24 John says, ‘Many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. *But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them*.’ In other words, they put their trust in him, but he did not entrust himself to them. Why not? Because, as Don Carson says in his commentary, Jesus knew superficial faith when he saw it. And he saw beneath the veneer. Because, unlike the rest of us, he’s not take in by flattery. But, Carson says, the implication is that to those who *do genuinely* trust Jesus, he will wonderfully entrust himself to them. As the Lord said through Jeremiah the prophet, ‘You will seek me *and find me*, when you seek me *with all your heart*.’ (Jer 29:13).

So this week, reflect on the messages you’re hearing - and what do you believe more - what Jesus says, or what others say? And put your trust in, and build your life on, what Jesus says.

But thirdly, and finally, and to finish where we started, what *does* get you angry or worked up? And what does that say about you? You see, Jesus is passionate about God and his people; about you, and you being set free from what binds you, and being able to approach God with boldness and confidence, by his grace.

So, as you consider what makes you angry, and the place pride, or reputation, or getting your own way play in that, and as you realise, we’re always, or at least often being bent out of shape by the wrong things, remember: where we fail, Jesus never does. And ask God to change your heart, that your heart would become more like Christ’s heart, and that love for God and passion for his people would grow.