

Sermon for 7th March 2021. John 2: 13-22
by The Reverend Ruth Hulse

This week we begin a book group for Lent studying the work of Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream, a Path to a better future*. In this book, Pope Francis urges us to consider what lessons the current crisis might teach us, how we might emerge from it inspired to build a better world, and what that better world might look like.

He begins with these words:

“To enter into a crisis is to be sifted. Your ways of thinking get shaken up; your priorities are challenged...

The question is whether you're going to come through this crisis and if so, how. The basic rule of a crisis is that you don't come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.”

Obviously Pope Francis is talking about the pandemic and how we emerge from the world of Covid, but I wonder whether there have been other crises in your life lately, other setbacks or disappointments that make you feel like you are being sifted, that you've been shaken up and your priorities challenged. As churches we might feel like this lately.

What has shaken us up this week? What has challenged us and our priorities? What has made us feel as though we may be being sifted?

And how will Pope Francis' basic rule of a crisis apply to us? We won't come out the same, but will we come out better or worse?

In our Gospel reading this morning those in the temple would surely have felt shaken up, having their priorities challenged as Jesus enters and seems to fly into a rage - turning over tables, driving out the money-changers and vendors, shouting and accusing. Yes, I think those people witnessing or on the wrong end of Jesus' actions may well have felt shaken up and challenged that day.

But let's look a little closer at the passage and ask some questions about the motives of Jesus, the assumption that he flew into a spontaneous rage, and what the result was - how the temple itself emerged from the crisis.

Some background: The temple in Jerusalem was the centre of worship for Jews, with sacrifice playing an important, even crucial role within ancient Judaism. Laws and obligations were established in order to accommodate the sacrificial requirements of the faith.

Both the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy attest to three mandatory pilgrimages for those who followed Judaism. And not only were acts of pilgrimage required but so were tithes and sacrificial offerings.

If a pilgrim were to make a journey to the temple in Jerusalem they may have travelled a long distance, not able to carry with them the animals needed for the sacrifice, and ordinary coins with the image of Caesar couldn't be used to pay the Temple tax, hence the need for money changers and merchants.

So if these people were necessary for pilgrims to make the sacrifices that were required of them, why was Jesus was angry at their presence?

One explanation is that these vendors were exploiting people, making a profit from devout Jews trying to follow the laws and obligations, keep the commandments and be faithful to God.

Another is that these vendors were making a mockery of God's dwelling place, the temple; his father's house, but the way they were shouting, jeering, bartering - much like we might find in a market place today, and perhaps quite enjoy the atmosphere, but was this appropriate for the temple?

But yet another understanding of the actions of Jesus is that he was making a declaration about God's House. That the temple sacrifices would no longer be needed because he himself would be that sacrifice and his sacrifice was given freely, that the Father dwelt in Him - he was the new temple and was establishing a new covenant that did not centre around an earthly building, but around the love of God shown through himself.

And as he drives out the money changers and the vendors and accuses them, he has assumed authority over the temple - authority over what takes place there, what is the purpose of the temple.

If we look back at the moment before Jesus lets loose, we notice the words 'making a whip of cords' Now I don't know how long it takes to make a whip, but it strikes me that Jesus did not enter the temple with a whip, he didn't enter the temple and immediately start turning over the tables - he didn't in fact need a whip. And yet he paused to make a whip of cords. That's quite a deliberate action.

Which leads me to believe that this was not necessarily just a reaction by Jesus to the corruption that he saw in the temple, but was also a demonstration, a deliberate act to provoke and make a statement.

So Jesus throws the temple into a crisis, uproots the day to day expectations of those who worked there or were visiting or were meeting there.

People are challenged and shaken up and they demand to know what on earth he thinks he is doing and by what authority he thinks he is doing it.

His answer baffles them - destroy the temple and I will raise it up in 3 days. Those who hear this cannot see any other meaning, any other way of interpreting Jesus' words than that he is talking literally about a building that has taken 46 years to construct.

Of course, with the gift of the whole story and the knowledge that Jesus died and was raised to life after 3 days, we know what Jesus meant, we can understand. But to those in the moment, they couldn't see anything but what they had already known, couldn't see another way. I wonder how many of those who witnessed the cleansing of the temple, as we've come to know it, later came to realise what Jesus meant, and became believers. And how many used the occasion to complain and build a case against Jesus and even after everything try to carry on with business as usual. But I imagine those events were very difficult to forget and brush away with no impact at all.

Referring back to Pope Francis:

“The basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.”

Let me ask again, what are the things that have shaken you up this week or lately? What are the things that have challenged your priorities? How are you being sifted?

And what might God be saying through it all? Is there a message that we need to hear, but don’t yet understand? Do we need to ask God to make things clear, or to give us patience until that time when understanding and a way forward will be presented? Is God perhaps challenging the way things HAVE been done in order to make a path for new life, a new covenant with his people, fresh insight?

The words I quoted at the start of this sermon were from the prologue of Pope Francis’ book and now, at the end of the sermon, let me refer to the epilogue of the book when he says:

“A crisis forces you to move, but one can move without going anywhere. In lockdown many of us left the house to shop for essentials or stretch our legs. But then we went back to where and what we were before, like a tourist who goes to the sea for a week of relaxation, but then returns to her routine. She has moved, but sideways, only to come back to where she started.

I prefer the contrasting image of the pilgrim, who goes out from herself, opens herself to a new horizon, and when she comes home she is no longer the same, and so her home won’t be the same.

This is a time for pilgrimages.”

Perhaps as we reflect on the challenges and crises we are facing at present, and how they are shaking us, it is to hope that it would be wise to turn.

Let us not forget that the temple in which Jesus overturned tables and directed accusations, challenging and shaking up those present, is the very same temple in which, as Jesus died, the curtain was torn from top to bottom. The curtain that kept God separate, kept God at a distance, was destroyed, just as Jesus destroyed the power of death over us. A new covenant was made.

This is indeed the time for pilgrimages: from death to new life, from disappointment to expectation, from despair to hope.

Let us pray that through God, we may be pilgrims from those crises we face to the expectation of new beginnings, new life, and a new hope.

Amen

