

From today's psalm:

*May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts
 be always acceptable in your sight,
 O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.*

(from Psalm 19:14)

Let's imagine for a moment the scene in today's gospel when, early in his ministry, Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem at Passover. The people there had made the annual pilgrimage to praise God for the liberation of the first Passover – when God used God's servant Moses (and others) to lead God's people from oppression and slavery in Egypt to freedom and service in the Promised Land. So let's remember why they were there: To worship God for good and glorious works.

Now let's look at how they did that.

The long-standing, accepted practice was to offer animal sacrifices. Because they'd travelled so long and far, most needed to buy the necessary animals when they got there. So, for the benefit of the pilgrims, animals appropriate for sacrifice were available for purchase. The intent was to facilitate the sacred traditions.

Most of the pilgrims would've come carrying the coin of the realm – bearing whose face? Caesar.

Would that be appropriate to use in the temple?

No, they had to exchange their secular coins imprinted with the likeness of Caesar, for the plain coins needed to pay the temple tax.

This was the service provided by money-changers.

The original purpose was not to scam anyone but to help the people worship in the way to which they had been accustomed.

In the way they had been taught was pleasing to God.

We as Episcopalians have our Prayer Book liturgy and purple for Lent and all the things that make our worship feel like worship to us; so it was for them in their context.

The issue, then, was not so much that they were doing something wrong, as maybe missing the point, missing the *new* possibilities right in front of them.

I know many of us love the story of Jesus “cleansing” the Temple, overturning those tables in righteous indignation. But you’ll find more of that in Mark or Matthew’s telling of the story. What we have before us today in John’s Gospel has a different emphasis. Jesus shifts the focus to the temple that is not the building but his body.

“Destroy this temple,” says Jesus, “and in three days I will raise it up.”

Three days? Everyone knows you can’t build a temple in three days. Ahhh, it says, Jesus was speaking of the temple of his Body. The Body of Christ.

Much later, when Jesus was raised from the dead -- after three days, his disciples remembered this and they believed.

God is present and active in the life and body of Jesus, in that of the disciples and all those present at the temple that day (including the moneychangers), and, yes, even you, today. God is not contained in any building, however grand.

Our lives were overturned almost exactly a year ago. Tomorrow, March 8, will mark the one-year anniversary of our last service in this temple as the Coronavirus was being declared a global pandemic. Our bishops had advised us not to touch while exchanging the Peace, and not to administer wine for Communion. I assumed we’d go on like that for a couple of weeks. After coffee hour, full steam ahead, I met with a parish leader in the Common Room to plan publicity for some upcoming events – who would talk at the 8:00 and the 9:30 over the next few Sundays.

We never dreamt we’d never get to hear those talks. We never imagined how quickly our concerns would go from that to scrambling to figure out how to “do” church without coming *to* church. How to *be* church without *being in* the church.

We've said for years that we are the church wherever we are.
To be corny about it, there's that old saying that "u r" the middle of church.
But were we ready to practice what we'd been preaching?
To really be the church wherever we are -- even if it's not here on Sunday mornings?

These past several weeks I've sometimes wondered
about the way I've positioned myself here with you having to see
all those empty pews behind me.
I've chosen this angle, at least for now, because it's "my" view –
it's what I see when I look out on you, the congregation,
under those graceful arches with that stunning marigold window dancing above.
I always said that I had the best seat and view in the house and now I get to share it.

On a practical level, I'm not a professional production assistant, and
this is one of the easier configurations for me to manage.

But there's something else, and for this I need your help.
At the beginning I asked you to imagine looking back in history
to what it was like to be in the temple in Jerusalem with Jesus.
Now I ask you to look forward into the future to imagine being here with Jesus.
It'll be beautiful.

In the meantime, the temple which is Jesus is not here waiting for you.
The temple which is Jesus is there with you, now, wherever you are.
When we're blessed to gather, together, in this place,
it's you who'll be bringing the temple with you.
The temple which is Jesus' body.
The temple which is the Body of Christ, and each of us its members,
whether we're home or outside or, some day, right here.

And when you get here, I hope we'll have the grace and the guts
not to try to recreate a past that no longer exists.
I pray we'll have the grace and the guts to let Jesus
overturn the tables of our safe, stale assumptions,
and lift us up into the new thing, new life, new way of being
the hands and heart of Jesus in this old world God so loves.

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