

Lent 3
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1 – 17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18 - 25
John 2:13 - 21

Zeal for your house will consume me!

The Ten Commandments still attract quite a lot of attention. There are those who try to write modern versions of them. There are those who want to put them up in bronze outside law courts and civic buildings. And in some emerging societies there are fraternities dedicated to implanting them in their newly forming culture. Most debate about the Ten Commandments seems to ignore the most significant thing of all: who is this God who gave us these words and before whom we are to have no other? The secret of the Ten Commandments lies in understanding the meaning of the first two verses: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*

The identity of the God we are called to worship is inextricably linked to an event in which, due to a strength not their own, the people found themselves set free from exploitation and oppression. God is the holy one of Israel whose power nullified the gods of Egypt, dismantled the Imperial power of that great land and, in allowing a motley band of slaves to escape into a new life proved how impotent the trappings of Empire really are.

The reason God “spoke all these words to the people” is not to repeat an ancient Hebrew version of another people’s set of rules for living, or to restrict their freedom. These words are given so that God’s people will have a format for keeping them focussed on God and free from all forms of adultery of the heart. In that way they will become truly wise because they will have chosen to live in the one servitude that brings life freedom, joy and enlightenment. The words God has given will enable them to protect their life together from exploitation and oppression, from within and without, and enable all they meet to experience something of what they have received from God. The Mission of God in giving the Commandments, then, was that the people of God should worship rightly and light up the world with their faithful, just living.

That is quite a challenge, for us as it was for them. Do we always get it right? No! Do we need to pause, reflect and renew ourselves in the vision of God that is meant to be driving us? Yes! Every Sunday, but the more so in Lent, we ask ourselves with greater urgency: are we on the right track? Do we need to stop and clean things out, rearrange our priorities, and make a fresh start? Such exercises are intended to bring us back to focus on the source of our life and in that renewing power enable us to flourish as God intended.

A high level of clearing out and refocussing occurs in the Gospel today. When he saw the Temple had been turned into a market place Jesus' consuming anger was memorable. It contradicted his normal image and has been taken up by all sorts of people for their own purposes.

The story has been connected with the memory of Psalm 69:9 *Zeal for your house will consume me!* There is good zeal and bad zeal. It is good when it leads a person to separate themselves from bad things to engage profoundly with the things of God. Bad when it leads a person to become so consumed with envy, or so fanatical about a cause, they will stop at nothing to achieve their goal. Bad zeal often co-opts faith for false purposes and gives faith a bad name. We know that not all perpetrators of bad zeal would agree their deeds are evil. But we have seen good zeal, such as the kind of steadfast single-minded commitment people like Nelson Mandela made seeking a better deal for African people.

Zeal for your house will consume me! The words come from a Psalm of lament in which the speaker is attacked for his single-minded dedication to the things of God. Jesus' anger reflects his zeal for the right worship of God. For John the one who clears out the rubbish and sets the household of God in order is the living expression of the glory of God among us. His "attack" on the church was an act of faith born of loyalty towards God.

When challenged by the authorities to give an authoritative sign Jesus speak ambiguously of his body and the Temple. He says that his resurrected body will be the Temple, the place where in the future true worship will take place. These are high claims. The members of the religious establishment could not grasp what was going on here. The Statements about destruction of the Temple did not add up. The double meanings here were a challenge to their imagination, and their openness to what the Spirit was doing in their midst. There is much in John about seeing and not seeing, but with him all candles illuminate one point: all facets of this story reflect one ray of light. The cleansing of the Temple testifies, not to the validity of anger, or the rightness of taking up arms, but to grace and truth living and working amongst us.

At first the disciples were no better than the others in grasping the truth. But after the resurrection - once the penny dropped they were able to witness to the meaning of these events and the resurrection became like a lens through which the first witnesses were able to reread the events of their journey with Jesus and retell the story to show us the deeper meaning. Their contact with his new life was the power that transformed their understanding. It empowered their living, their dying and rising with him celebrated in Baptism, and nourished ever after at every Eucharist.

Lent is a good time for us, as individuals and as church, to reflect on where we expend our zeal - our energy for the things that really matter to us. Where is our focus? Are we, as church, providing ways whereby people find themselves in a life giving relationship that transforms and refreshes their understanding of God, community and service? Or have our churches, our structures and our life together, through custom or apathy, become cluttered with agendas that are secondary to our real concern.

The picture of the Temple, the protected space that has become a market in which the sounds of trade drown the sounds of prayer, is one that we should aim to take seriously. Even in churches the seed of new life can be choked. Some have traded their relationship with Jesus for an excuse to be involved in violence, disguised as righteous anger. Others have traded him for ideological commitments of their own design. Others keep themselves so busy there is no space to attend to a relationship that challenges and brings life.

Lent is a time for examining what we are zealous about. And it is a time when we reflect on what it means to guard the place where we are open to being surprised, challenged and renewed by God's gift of life. May this season continue to challenge and enrich us, to the glory of God.
