

Lent 3
8/3/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

Tear down this temple

Church spires are not what they used to be.

This is the case, at least in the sense in which our own church tower has developed its own expensive and potentially dangerous little lean! More importantly, it is the case in the fact that towers and spires have been not merely overshadowed but dwarfed by the kinds of buildings we construct today. Whereas once church spires spoke across a whole landscape about what was central and what was peripheral to life, today they are lost in the midst of the dynamics of modern corporatism and the way in which that is shaping our cities and our lives: higher, denser, more. Whereas once the church tower stood out as a marvel of human engineering, a great arrow pointing to the eternal, now those same towers are relativised – one more (usually quaint) construction among many signifying one more “option” in the world.

This shift matters for our making sense of John’s account of the clearing of the Temple in our gospel reading this morning. This is a story very familiar to long-time Christians. Jesus gets angry here – no mere “meek and mild” saviour today – and this sticks in our minds. It is heard around Easter every year which, if we are paying attention, ought to be a little surprising – at least when we hear John’s version of the story. Whereas Mark, Matthew and Luke place the story at the very end of Jesus’ public ministry – which is why we hear it each year in Lent – John places it at the very beginning of the ministry, which is up to two years before Easter, on John’s own time line.

Easter is still present in the reading – in the reference to Jesus dying and rising – but it is no longer the immediate context. If it is the case that this is the same event the other gospel writers describe, and that their timing at Easter was correct, then John has deliberately unhooked the story from its position as a kind of *climax* of Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities and moved it to the beginning of the gospel as a kind of *programmatically* statement. No longer is it what everything *came to*, but a foretaste of what everything was always going to be.

And what is being “tasted” here right at the start? Not only has John changed the location of the story, he has also shifted the emphasis. In the other three gospels the emphasis is what we might call moral: the attack is on the market itself and, implicitly, on those who have allowed it to happen. The Temple has been corrupted, so that we sometimes speak of this as the “cleansing” of the Temple.

In John’s account something of that moral dimension remains: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” But then the emphasis shifts in Jesus’ remarks about tearing down the Temple. “I will build it up in three days” can make no sense, of course, although John is very happy for his Jesus to make no sense. Or, rather, John likes to have those Jesus’ talks to take him literally when he can only mean something more figurative. But, John’s technique aside, his point is clear: the object is not the cleansing of the Temple but its replacement. Forty-six years in the

making and still not finished, the Temple is nothing compared to Jesus himself. It is no wonder that he makes no sense.

And for us today? Our problem is that we know the story so well. We know, in a way that first century Jews could not, that church buildings are not “churches” or temples. We all know that “the church is the people.” And so the church has no shortage of people who take up the role of Jesus and preach “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” or “people, people, people” against the spires and the windows and the organs. Over against them, of course, are those who have also read the story but see great value in bricks and mortar.

For our purposes here, however, the point is that as difficult as the conversation can sometimes be it is not especially *shocking* to us – not shocking in the way that Jesus must have been in this exchange with the Temple authorities. In fact for them it is beyond shock – they can only ridicule him.

Perhaps it is the case that we are not shocked in the same way he was because church spires no longer dominate the landscape: our temple is too small.

What I mean is this: the church, and what it represents, is no longer big enough for us to be shocked by the idea that Jesus might somehow replace it. For Jesus to refer to himself as the Temple in front of the Temple authorities was to compare the *nothing* of a back-block boy to the *everything* which the rebuilding of the Temple represented. As we discuss whether to sell a building or repair it, or think about reforming the denomination through a strategic review, it is all a bit too small because, should the wider world be overhearing these conversations, they will seem all very in-house. With the relegation of churches and their towers to mere addresses on busy streets in the midst of much more imposing structures, so are the perceived concerns of the church relegated. “Religious” concerns, as the business of the church is categorised, are too small really to matter, for “religion” is only a part of what we are as a society today.

If they are to be of the order which John suggests the very person of Jesus was for the Temple in that time, then attacks on temples today cannot be “religious” in the narrow modern sense. That is, the temples which matter, against which the claims of Jesus might be measured, will not be churches and their spires or budgets. They will be those things which somehow represent “the whole” for us as a society.

And so the question is: what is Temple-like in our worlds today? What keeps us awake at night, or makes the hair on the back of our necks rise, or will cause uproar in the Twittersphere, or bring down a government, or take us to war? Take any one of those things and fit them into this declaration: Tear it down, and I will build it up again in three days. Tear down this economy, and I will build it up in three days. Tear down this nation-state, and I will build it up in three days. Tear down this family, and I will build it up in three days.

If Jesus is the Temple, in his exchange with the authorities, then he is our “everything” too – but also cannot possibly be. How is Jesus the economy, which so fills our news reports, or the nation with its sovereign borders we fight so hard to secure, or the ANZAC tradition we think so thoroughly defines what it means to be Australian, or the one thing I think is breaking me, or making me? He cannot be, in the same way in which he could not have been that magnificent Temple. And yet, if he is not, then he does not finally matter – just a religious part of a whole with many parts, none of which is essential.

I do not think that God really minds that much about temples, towers, borders, economies, traditions. These are the things which people do and, loving people as he does, God can love these things as well. But they become for us so much more than “things”. An idea, an identity, a relationship, a possession – all such things are “temples” in the sense of our text this morning.

But tearing them down also gets us nowhere; every revolution replaces what is destroyed with much the same thing. The same arrogance and hubris which often drove church spires higher and higher into the sky now drives the skyscrapers higher and higher. Temples will be ever with us, even if it no longer *looks* as if prayer is their principle purpose.

The story that Lent tells is that there is really only one Temple which is worth tearing down: the one which so incomprehensibly challenges all the others. This is the Temple which is most problematic, Jesus says.

And it is torn down.

Is it rebuilt on the third day? This is the question the proclamation of the resurrection presents to us: not the dead-end question of whether a dead man can stop being dead, but whether we might be cured of our temple-building, of making sacred things out of merely created stuff. Our reading this morning stopped a little short of the end of the chapter. In the last couple of verses we read: “...Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew humankind and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in the human.” What is in us is many things. It is the good which brings God to us: “for God so loved the world” that he sent the Son. It is the dangerous in us which brings about the crucifixion: do you not know that it is better that one die than that we lose all our “place” – this Temple, and all the rest – the high priest will later ask (John 11.48-50).

The gospel is that, in the midst of all our extraordinary capacity to attach so deeply to the secondary things, and in the face of the devastation that brings, there is a promised rebuilding. This Word becomes flesh and fills it out – the very presence of God in the mundane and ordinary, whatever shape it takes. When we break the bread and take the cup this is the story we tell: whatever we do – even the crucifixion of the Lord of glory – God can work with that.

Build it up, tear it down – God has our measure, knows what is in us, and will make it work. There is great freedom in this: to have without being weighed down, to give without fear of not receiving.

May the people of God ever grow more fully into that freedom, that all people might know the life which this God promises. Amen.
