

Remember!

John 2.13-22

According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus symbolically cleanses the temple in Jerusalem as he nears the end of his ministry. In Matthew (21.12-17), Mark (11.15-19), and Luke (19.45-48), Jesus enters the temple, overturns the tables of the traders and quotes Isaiah (56.7), "My house shall be called a house of prayer" and Jeremiah (7.11), "You have made it a den of robbers." Unsurprisingly, his action intensifies the Jewish leaders' determination to silence him, indeed to destroy him (Mark 11.18; Luke 19.47).

John's account differs from this account in several very important ways. First, in John, the cleansing of the Temple takes place when Jesus is just beginning his ministry. John tells us that after the miracle of water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana, that his disciples "believed in him" (John 2.11), and that Jesus then returned to Capernaum in Galilee "with his mother and his brothers and his disciples" (2.12).

Now, in this morning's gospel reading, we see the disciples actively engaged in trying to understand this Jesus in whom they "believe", with the help of Scripture. We also will see in these verses that understanding both the Scripture and the Lord is an unfolding process. In fact, the "remembering" of Scripture and Jesus' own words are at the centre of the lives of Jesus' disciples; and it is extremely useful to us as Jesus' latest disciples to see his first disciples moving towards a deeper realisation of what it means to believe in him.

Belief on the basis of Jesus' first sign would quickly prove shallow, even untenable. That belief, important as it may have been, had to be deepened and extended, and so the cleansing of the Temple elaborates Jesus' identity for his disciples and for John's readers, including ourselves. In addition, it prompts his disciples then and now toward continuing engagement with Scripture as God's reliable – if not always crystal clear! – word about God's purposes in this world which God loves.

The passage opens with several verses describing Jesus' coming into the temple and making his whip of cords to drive out business people and all their paraphernalia. It then develops as a dialogue about his actions (vv. 16, 18-20), in which Jesus and the Jews talk at one another; this will become a familiar characteristic of John's gospel.

Woven into this dialogue (vv. 17, 22) are descriptions of his disciples' reactions to what is going on before their eyes and what is being said about it, with a comment from the narrator (v. 21) for the reader's sake.

In essence, then, there are half a dozen characters in this short passage (vv.13-22):

- Jesus
- the Jews
- the disciples
- the narrator
- the voice of the prophet Zechariah
- the voice of the psalmist (David, according to Psalm 69)
- and the readers, implied by the narrator's need to interpret Jesus' statement.

Central to the passage, and even more so for its use as a Lenten text, is the act of interpretation and remembering. Both times the disciples appear, they are remembering. Jesus explains the cleansing of the temple in prophetic terms, decrying the use of the temple for trade; and the disciples then reflect (v. 17) on Jesus' quotation of Zechariah 14.20-21 in terms of Psalm 69.9.

The historical fact that the trade going on in the Temple was legitimate, and indeed necessary for pilgrims and others who did not have suitable coinage to purchase the animals needed in temple worship, is irrelevant to Jesus. Rather, Jesus is declaring himself both as prophet and as one who claims that the Lord's house is his "Father's" house. In this, his disciples have the first hint of the extreme conflict that will be at the heart of Jesus' ministry, and recognise it as foreshadowing his death.

In spite, however, their dawning comprehension of the risks Jesus, Son of God, King of Israel (1.49) is taking, the disciples are no more able than "the Jews" to grasp fully his statement in verse 19; and remember that the disciples themselves, like Jesus, are also Jews. Jesus offers a sign so outrageous and so incomprehensible that it is not until after his resurrection that his disciples understand what he has just said.

Jesus seems to be speaking of the Temple building, but is he? By the time of John's gospel, the Temple in Jerusalem has been cast down, but Jesus has been raised from the dead. Is he, then, the Temple himself, the one whom God has sent to take the place of the Jerusalem Temple? Indeed it would seem so, given Jesus' statement in John 4.20-23, because the Jerusalem Temple is not raised again. Certainly, when John informs his readers that Jesus himself was raised from the dead in three days, they and we can clearly see that the old Temple building is now irrelevant to Christians.

The disciples, of course, have all this discernment still before them. They do not hear the John's explanation, while we readers, by contrast, are doubly reassured by his assurance.

First, we are informed that Jesus had a particular meaning in mind, which was not understood by his contemporary audience: a meaning that makes Jesus' prophecy abundantly true.

Secondly, we are reassured that the disciples come to understand this when their experience catches up with that of the readers; that is, when the disciples find out what the narrator and his audience already know, that Jesus will die and be raised in three days; then they, too, will look back at this prediction in verse 19 and fully understand it.

At that point, after Jesus' resurrection when the disciples remember this moment and understand their Lord more fully, they offer an example to us. For remembering and belief come together again in verse 22. They remember what Jesus said. They have seen it come to pass. They believe anew, both in Scripture (the prophetic word Jesus cites) and in Jesus' own prophetic word.

This passage lays before us a promise that if we pay attention and remember, then Scripture and its Lord will be revealed as true and reliable. However mysterious and incomprehensible Jesus' words or deeds may be in the present, to engage with belief and keep Scripture in mind will eventually bring his disciples to the place where things come together and belief is created.

The passage reminds us of two additional things (at least!). One is that expanding, deepening, maturing belief comes in a process of engaging, experiencing, and remembering. Another is that this is possible because the same God has sent the prophets whose words are Scripture (even for Jesus) and has sent Jesus. This God continues to be among us as the Holy Spirit. The reliability of Scripture, and the reliability of Jesus, are God's reliability, God's faithfulness.

Revd Robert Beard B.D.