

'Time for a spring clean?' was a sermon preached by Margery Spencer on March 4th 2018. Exodus 20: 1-17 and John 2: 13-22. Lent 3.

To-do-lists

I am not the most organised of people. Planning a long term in advance is not one of my fortes and I tend to leap into things and think later. I know I should plan ahead but I often fail to do so.

I do occasionally make to-do lists and then fail to refer to them, make shopping lists and leave them on the kitchen table. And of course I leave the bags-for-life in the car.

My younger daughter is very different, she can make lists of things to do and stick to them. A few weeks ago she had to go for work to Chicago where the temperature was well below zero, and after two weeks head to California and then to Mexico where the temperature was in the mid twenties. She had planned her wardrobe carefully and put things in the appropriate order in her suitcase.

For me it would have been throw everything in the bag and hope for the best and probably the things I needed first would be at the bottom on the suitcase.

Watercolours

My tendency to rush into things without really thinking them out, also shows in my attempts at painting. If you paint watercolours you really do have to think carefully about how you are going to do it. Because rectifying your mistakes is very difficult. With acrylic paints you can always just paint over them. My art teacher has been known to say Margery, don't rush into it – think it out first. But I never seem to learn from my mistakes.

I suppose it is all about getting things in the right order, getting the priorities right. In my case planning my picture, preparing enough paint and waiting for one bit of paint to dry before putting more on. I really am just too enthusiastic to finish.

Priorities

In a way our gospel reading today is about getting priorities right. It is a story which is to be found in all four gospels therefore we can assume it was regarded as a very important one. Although the other gospel writers place the story at the end of Jesus' ministry John puts it very near the beginning. I don't think that matters as all the gospels were written some time after the death of Jesus and we all know that people remembering the same event will have very different versions. John obviously thinks that this story is a critical one to be dealt with early. So today we will look at his version.

After the wedding in Cana, Jesus and his friends returned for a short visit to Capernaum the north shore of Galilee about twenty miles distant. From there Jesus set out to observe the Passover Feast in Jerusalem. It was obligatory for every adult male Jew who lived within

about fifteen miles of Jerusalem to go to the Temple. But it was not only the Jews in Palestine who came to the Passover.

Passover

By this time, Jews were scattered all over the world but they never forgot their ancestral faith and their homeland. It was and often still is the dream and aim of all Jews to spend Passover in Jerusalem. Improbable as it may seem even at the time of Jesus there could be as many as 2 million Jews assembled in Jerusalem for the Passover.

And when they arrived at the temple they had to pay the temple tax which was a half shekel about two days wages. In Palestine itself all forms of currency were valid. Coins from Rome, from Greece Egypt and Tyre and Sidon were all acceptable currency. But the temple tax had to be paid in Galilean shekels or in shekels of the sanctuary. Other coins were deemed acceptable for other earthly debts but not for a debt to God.

So in the temple there were money changers, like a branch of Thomas Cook - a bureau de change - where currency of all countries could be exchanged into Galilean shekels. If there had been honest and fair dealings there would have been no problem. It was perfectly acceptable and legal to pay a fair commission on the exchange.

On commission

The Temple tax was half a shekel. So if you had a shekel which was not Galilean you had to pay commission to have it changed. But if your coin was larger, for example a two shekel coin, you paid commission twice, once to get the half shekel you needed but also a second time to get back the surplus one and half shekels. This tax made a lot of money for the temple but also a lot of money for the money changers who had a captive market and creamed off a pretty substantial amount for themselves.

As well as the money changers, in the temple there were sellers of doves, oxen and sheep to be used as sacrifice. Many of the people coming to the temple might well bring their own animals for sacrifices but there were temple inspectors who examined the sheep and doves and declared whether they were fit to be used.

Needless to say many of them were declared unacceptable so the people had to purchase alternatives from the sellers within the temple at an exorbitant cost. Doves bought in the temple could cost up to fifteen times more than those bought outside. It was an unjust rip off. It was exploitation. Exploitation particularly of the poor and humble pilgrims.

Exploitation

And it was mainly because of this exploitation that Jesus was so angry. Because Jesus loved God and God's people it angered him to see them used in this way and he showed his anger by taking a whip and turning over the tables of the money changers and sellers. And railing at them for turning the temple into a marketplace.

This was not the gentle Jesus we so often hear of, but an irate Jesus. Irate because people were being treated so badly but also because the house of God was being turned into a commercial enterprise with all the hustle, bustle and cacophony of noise that is associated with a marketplace.

It had become a place where people could not pray, a place where they were unable to find peace and quiet to commune with God.

Anger

So there were two main reasons why Jesus was so angry. Firstly because the house of God was being desecrated. There was worship with no tranquillity. There was clatter, noise, arguments but no reverence. It was no longer a house of prayer. It was not a place where people could come to encounter God and find comfort and peace.

Secondly, there was the mistreatment of the pilgrims who had come to celebrate Passover. Commerce had taken over and was being abused to make money for some.

This event is described as the cleaning of the temple. The clearing out of activities which were inappropriate in the house of God.

In Jesus eyes the money changers, the sellers and some of the Temple officials had forgotten was the temple was really there for. God and worship had become secondary to secular things.

They had not got their priorities in order. They had not placed first things first. God was not at the centre of the activities of the temple and Jesus knew that he had to act forcibly to change things.

Commandments

He knew the ten commandments, which we heard in our Old Testament lesson. Yes the commandment that there is only one God and that there should be no other Gods which we worship. And he honoured the commandments. And that is what resulted in his anger – people's neglect of God within the temple.

What about us?

This is a story of events in the first century. But what has it to tell us in the 21st century? Jesus shows us in this story that sometimes we have to take a firm stance. Perhaps doing something which would make us unpopular, even blowing our top to ensure that the right things happen. That there is a time for righteous anger,

It also tells us that sometimes we must look at our churches to ensure that God is at the centre of our thinking and our actions. To make sure that we are not so busy with the mundane and the physical. Or so busy with the monetary aspect of church life that we

forget the spiritual. I am not for one minute suggesting that the physical and practical aspects do not matter. Of course they do. But I am saying that we must ask ourselves do we place God, place Christ high on our agenda of church life. At PCC meetings do we nod to God in opening prayers and in the closing grace? Or do we really put first things first and make the whole of our church life God and Christ centred?

A personal spring clean

And it isn't just our church life but our personal ones. As Christ cleansed the temple, so Lent provides us with the opportunity to spring clean our lives. To cut out those things which do not find favour with God. It is a time to look at our priorities, put them in order, so that our lives are centred on and reflect the God we serve.

Our prayer this Lent should perhaps be in the words of the hymn "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Then all these things shall be added unto you - alleluia."

May Christ be at the top of our priorities in the coming week and at all times.