**#OccupytheTemple**

We continue with our second message in a series entitled The House of Prayer. The series is really based around today’s passage, John 2:13-22.

Jesus enters Jerusalem in the last week of his life and what he sees makes him livid, he just loses it really. It is a side of Jesus we see very rarely in the gospels, and never this intense.

He drives out the sellers and moneychangers from the outer courts of the Temple. It is a magnificent anger.

Let’s listen to our text read by Luke this morning.

[Insert Luke reading John 2:13-22]

It isn’t present in the John account, but in all three synoptics we Jesus saying this. It is a combination of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11:

“It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’;
    but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Thus my title for today’s message attempts to capture this confrontation of Jesus with, well, corporate temple Judaism: #OccupytheTemple.

So, by way of setting the context, let me talk about Jerusalem and the Temple economy for a bit…

Jerusalem was a hill city with poor access to water, only one good well (Gihon), it didn’t have any natural resources and it was out of the main trade routes.

But Jerusalem did have one thing: It was the world centre of the Jewish people, and it had the Temple.

The presence of the Temple made business even more difficult due to the many strictures that were required for ritual purity. Matters of diet and food preparation, what was called *midras* uncleanness, proper procedures for slaughtering animals and the disposition of their blood. Jerusalem is a city on kosher steroids.

Despite all of this it was a frenetic city of trading and tourism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jeremias estimates 125,000 pilgrims at a time of Passover. A local population of 25-55,000. A total of 150-180,000 in a small walled city, figure 7 football fields long and 10 wide (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp 83-84). Passover was madness.

Put aside your romantic notions of the Temple, it was a place where over 100,000 sheep must be slaughtered, within the precincts of the city, on a typical Passover. Think of the logistics, the barely organized chaos of it all.[[2]](#endnote-2) Apparently there was bidding, ten buyers for every lamb for sale in Jerusalem at Passover and rabbinic sources suggest there were over 300 shops for the sale of “clean” animals for sacrifice.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Foreign trade was crucial to the economy of Jerusalem and the operation of the Temple. Goods flowed from Babylon, Greece, Arabia and Jerusalem’s wealth flowed back to these places. As did these hundreds of thousand of pilgrims annually from these many places. It was a cosmopolitan city.

The dimensions of the actual sanctuary building itself were small by ANE standards, so when Herod undertook the restoration of the Temple he compensated for the actual temple’s small size by building the largest temple platform in the world. It walls extended 80 ft above ground and 50 ft below. The largest stone is 40 ft long and the heaviest is 100 tons. It was a wonder of the world.

Did you know that Herod dismantled the actual sanctuary building and rebuilt it in about 18 months? It was partly his half Jewish heritage that motivated him, but really it was a political statement to Rome – look at me!

And then there was the ***money***. The Temple economy, as in all important temple cities of the world, supported a vast priestly aristocracy, temple employees, Levites from all around the country on their annual rotation of service, the buying and selling of livestock for sacrifices and the changing of money from “unclean” currencies to the acceptable currency, the didrachma[[4]](#endnote-4), all of which it held in monopoly.[[5]](#endnote-5)

One estimate says there were about 6 million Jews living in the known world at that time. Millions were pouring into the Temple coffers from the collected the annual temple tax, collected world-wide, to be paid by every Israelite (Matt 17:24-27, remember Jesus had Peter go catch a fish to pay it?).

The “second tithe” enjoined by the Bible had to be spent in Jerusalem, further swelling the influx of money into the city. I’ll talk about tithing some day – Pastor Jimmy… give me the nod.[[6]](#endnote-6) Not because we want more money, but because its interesting and important to our relationship what we do with the money He entrusts to us.

The Temple served as a bank for private capital, as temples did in the ANE. You could leave your money on deposit there.

After Jesus cleared the Temple the Jews said to him, ‘Show us a sign.’ And he said Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up (John 2:19). There is a whole other sermon! But 40 years later Titus and the Tenth Legion Fretensis “…turned the magnificent holy compound into smoldering uninhabitable ruins” (ABD, vol IV, pl 365).

When it was destroyed Titus carried its treasures to Rome. Particular mention is made of a gold menorah, a candelabrum many feet tall, that was exhibited as evidence of the Temple’s grandeur.

And then, one day, a Galilean prophet rides into the city on a donkey…

and takes it all on.

And if you are the temple hierarchy you just can’t have Galilean peasants coming into town and threatening the revenue stream. You just can’t tolerate it. And they didn’t. And a week later he was crucified. Is there a connection? I’m just saying…

Jesus was a Jew, he loved the Law and Temple, he was dedicated in the Temple, taught there as a young boy, on occasion told those he healed to offer the proper offering. But this clearing of the Temple was a protest of practice, not of the religion itself, or the existence of the Temple.

It was a protest that the voice of God had been drowned out. A House of Listening had become a House of Things.

There were three things that we can take from the incident which reveals Jesus’ soul to us… and what it teaches us about listening today.

**1**. Jesus objected to commerce being conducted within the precincts of the Temple.

Can you understand Jesus’ anger to see the Temple precincts co-opted by this massive business operation? This conducting of trade and selling and money changing was essential to the operation of the cultus. [[7]](#endnote-7) The functions of all temple in the ANE, in the Roman world were closely tied to the state. Public sacrifices, official holy days, storing treasure, meetings of leaders, trials.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Jesus was livid about what he saw as a corruption of the cultus. He lost it. ***He took it all on***. #OccupytheTemple.

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

The cleansing of the Temple is a protest against the behemoth of corporate Judaism, misplaced loyalties running amuck, right in the courts of the Temple. A protest of the drowning out of God’s voice.

Jesus was livid at what he saw. He had zero chance of changing anything about this industrial temple complex, it was a hopeless protest. #Occupythetemple had no more chance of success than #Occupywallstreet had of changing Wall Street.

But a cause is never hopeless if you are on the right side.

It is really a most relevant critique not just of Temple Judaism, but also of all modern culture.

Income inequality is as old as human society. Today half the world’s wealth is owned by 1% of the population, and its growing. Elon Musk made 25 billion last Tuesday.

Jesus’ actions remind us of the dangers of the obsessions with the House of Things in which we find ourselves living…our own golden calves, drawing our eyes and ears away from listening to the voice of God.

We all know that where there is religion and too much money in the same place there is the potential for corruption.

I have a strict policy that I don’t diss individuals in my messages, which is why I’m not going to go on about Jerry Falwell II, who raised over one billion dollars for Liberty University, enough said.

You can’t mix making money and politics with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Those who use the gospel to make money, who supplant the true faith of servanthood and suffering with another agenda become the sellers and moneychangers of our day, rather than the prophets and priests we need in the community of faith.

2. ***Jesus objected to how voice of God for the widow, the orphan and the outcast had been lost in the chaos.***

You thought I was going to talk about personal and corporate prayer in this series. And it is important, the real point of this series is that listening to God is more important than talking to God.

The question is ‘Listening to what?’ A House of Listening to what?[[9]](#endnote-9)

Jesus answers this by his quotation of Isa 56: ‘My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples”

Care for the widows and orphans and outcasts is probably one of the chief features of classical prophecy. It’s everywhere. Jesus quotes both of these prophets who repeatedly critique temple culture for its ignoring of the marginalized.

Did you know we are a second tithing church? 20% of what we bring in as a congregation goes to various ministries and charities. It’s very biblical and I love it. See my notes for a list – I don’t have time to get into it this morning.[[10]](#endnote-10)

3. Jesus objected to how the Temple had become a Jewish place, when God had commanded that it be “a ***house for all the people”***

An inscription stone found in 1935 from Herod’s temple says: “Foreigner do not enter within…the partition surrounding the Temple. He who is caught will have only himself to blame for his death.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Jesus’ actions say, “Are you listening Israel?” “Are you listening church?”

Until you stop excluding foreigners from my presence – until you stop failing to provide sustenance to orphans and widows – until you stop going after other gods – your prayers mean nothing.

No wonder Isaiah 56 rises up in Jesus’ heart as he throws down the tables!

The cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is about what Isaiah 56 is about, is about what Jeremiah 7 is about. Because that is what he quotes as the coils up his whip, as he eyes the tables laden with currency, as he sees the masses bidding on lambs for the Passover sacrifice.

His disciples reflected at a later time, “zeal for his father’s house consumes him” (Psalm 69:9).

And in one of the more haunting prophetic utterances in Jeremiah, no small thing to say!,

Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

To this Jesus says by is actions, “so your love your House of Things… but to whom are you listening?”

He says, ‘Let the gates of this temple, those doors constantly self-closing because of your attachment to the business of the Temple, to the particulars of religious ritual, to this new corporate form of idolatry, be thrown open to all even the foreigners who wish to join to me (Isaiah 56:6).’

It’s always kind of hard to read these kinds of prophetic texts that can expose our own attachments to shiny objects and false loyalties.[[12]](#endnote-12)

As we move forward in ministry, seeking God for the role and mission of the church in the generation to come – how does the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus of Nazareth inform our identity as a House of Listening?

1. “Despite this, within its walls this city contained flourishing industries, and maintained a widespread trade. Above all it received a regular influx of people which linked it with all parts of the known world and at times completely outnumbered the inhabitants of the city. The reason for this is that the city contained the central shrine of world Jewry” (Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp 83-84). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. No one, including most Jews, wants to see a Temple re-established in Judaism. I think you are misreading apocalyptic if you think that is going to happen, the days of Temple cultus are over, thankfully. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremias, p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “The cultus provided the main source of income for the city. It maintained the priestly aristocracy, the priesthood and the Temple employees. The vast expenditure from the Temple treasury (one need only think of the rebuilding of the Temple) to say noting of the many ceremonial activities of the devout such as sacrifices and vows – provided numerous opportunities of money-making for the trade and commerce of the city” (Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus p. 138*). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. And then there was the ***money***. The Temple economy, as in all important temple cities of the world, supported a vast priestly aristocracy, temple employees, Levites from all around the country on their annual rotation of service, the buying and selling of livestock for sacrifices and the changing of money from “unclean” currencies to the acceptable currency, the didrachma, all of which it held in monopoly.

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6. You might be surprised to learn that the system of tithing had become quite complex in Jesus’ day. There were actually five tithes; consider yourself lucky if you only have one. The “second tithe” or second tenth of your goods could only be spent *in Jerusalem* in your annual pilgrimage, and if you couldn’t bring your tithe in goods to Jerusalem you sold it at home and brought the money. You can see that the amount of money flowing into Jerusalem and through the Temple organization was absolutely immense.

Jerusalem was also the city of charity. It was, in part because it was a city that was very hard to make a living in, a difficult place for business operation because of the demands of ritual purity particular to the city, but because its native population was inundated multiple times a year by tens of thousands of visitors. Even today on the streets of Jerusalem you will see the most touching scenes of kindness and gentleness to those begging for money on its streets.

How different from the way we treat panhandlers. We look through them as though they don’t exist, embarrassed by their need. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. We call this system of temple worship the cultus: A system of religious beliefs and rituals, in biblical studies with particular reference to animal sacrifice, i.e. temple practice. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol VI, pl 375). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. But the practice of prayer isn’t what this is about at all. In fact, God says to Jeremiah, As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. (Jer 7:16) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Did you know Vic Naz tithes 20% of her income to outside the church walls?

	* Youth for Christ,
	* Sanctuary Youth centre,
	* Gideons,
	* Mustard Seed – which all fall under Community Services
	* World Evangelism,
	* Ambrose University,
	* District Church,
	* Nazarene Compassionate Ministries,
	* Work & Witness, etc.
	* NMI we also give to Faith Promise.
	* CRW has sent over 500 40’ shipping containers, 50 corporate sponsors contributing to the effort, 30,000 volunteer hours a year, all of the goods shipped to places of need donated. Untold blessings – a real work of God. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *An Illustrated Atlas of Jerusalem*, Don Bahat, p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I was interested to see this in Vox news: “Golden calf: It’s a story about the allure of idolatry, how easy it is to abandon one’s commitment to principle in favour of shiny, easy falsehoods.” (Vox, Beauchamp, Feb 26). True prophetic words. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)