**John 2: 13-22**

 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I remember when our boys were in their late teens, a very long time ago, they were avid players of a variety of sports, so whenever the subject came up and they were going out with friends, we were firmly assured that they would not be drinking more than a pint or two because, and I quote, my body is a Temple, mother…….

And we all sort of know what is meant by the phrase when used in that context, but it is still a slightly odd one. So what does it mean to keep one’s body as a temple?

While the whole concept of incarnation iscentral to our Christian doctrine, it is very difficult to link that teaching to our own flesh and bones and blood. And even more difficult to understand the importance of honouring and accepting the sacredness of all the bodily ‘stuff’ that we are made of.

Yet that is precisely what Jesus does in this week’s Gospel reading, when he makes himself a whip, overturns the tables of the money-changers, drives out the sheep and cattle, and dares his listeners to destroy this temple.  They, naturally enough, misunderstand and assume that Jesus is referring to the temple of Herod they’re all at that moment standing in. But no, says John in his Gospel: Jesus isn’t referring to buildings of stone or brick or wood or anything else.  The transcendent does not reside in a courtyard, a tower, or at an altar - God is to be found in a different kind of temple altogether, namely the temple which is Jesus’ own body.

And while my boys may have been speaking a bit tongue-in-cheek about keeping their post-match celebrations to a reasonable level, we nonetheless find everywhere around us – and not only in the media – the worship of the body: the importance of nails and hair being tended, the spray tan. And I’m not saying that is wrong, don’t get me wrong – it is indeed right that we should look after what God gave us, but I fear we don’t always pay the same attention to the inward parts as we do to the outward ones.

So what might it mean then to honour our bodies as holy places, as homes in which God dwells?

In Christian culture, the body is sometimes viewed as inherently sinful – depends to some extent on your reading of the Creation and Fall stories in Genesis – and that is exacerbated by a secular culture that turns the body so often into a commodity. So we tend to end up with skewed views: with the sense that our bodies are imperfect, therefore must lack value and have to be tamed, changed, by force of will. We see our flaws far more readily than we see the God-given dignity of bodies. And in seeing the flaws, we make it difficult for ourselves to see them as founts, and receptacles, of love and grace.

We are called to see ourselves as people of the Incarnation: people who not only follow Christ, but share in his actions – come and see; break this bread, drink this cup; wash the feet… Our whole selves have to be involved in finding God: our physical selves, our intellectual and emotional selves. But to experience all of that, we have to get past not only our self-hatred and self-contempt, but also past our intellectualising – everything that we are is involved in and with God.

In today’s Gospel reading, the price to be paid for honouring human flesh, human-ness, as the home of the divine is high: what Jesus denounces when he performs this so-called cleansing of the temple is not Judaism, nor its forms of worship, but the system of exploitation, iniquitous in the extreme, that demanded exorbitant tithes and taxes; and it is that exploitation that blocks access to the divine — that literally here keeps the bodies of the poor outside the gates of the temple, forcing them further and further into debt before they are allowed to approach and worship God.

But now it gets even harder: if we even try to recognise that God loves us, mind, soul and body, then we have also to recognise that God loves the minds, souls and bodies of everyone, everywhere – starving children, obviously, but also power-hungry world leaders, drug addicts and prostitutes just as much as church-going, law-abiding citizens of the UK.

And that belief makes it impossible to ignore that we too have to show due reverence for other bodies. And since those other bodies are equally temples of God’s love and grace, then we cannot stand by and watch those other bodies being exploited, being abused, or discriminated-against, or sitting on street corners, without being moved to action of some kind, however insignificant it might seem.

It is abundantly clear that Jesus could not.  He interrupted divine worship going on in the Temple in order to demand justice.  We see him graduate from compassion to righteous anger to violent action, because he was not prepared to stand for the violation of sanctuary.  He would not accept access to his Father's house being blocked.  He would not tolerate any manifestation of unfairness or cruelty towards the most vulnerable people in his society.

There’s something about anger so extreme that makes us feel uncomfortable. We don’t talk about anger in polite secular circles, much less in the church. It feels somehow unsophisticated, crude, vulgar. But Jesus — the temple of God — positively burned with anger on behalf of his Father’s house. He wasn’t wishy-washy. He allowed this great holy anger to move him to action for those who were voiceless and helpless.

There is nothing godly about responding to cultural and systemic evil with passive acceptance or silent complicity. If human bodies are really temples, then we must work, as Jesus did, to preserve and protect these holy places from all forms of desecration.  Our highest calling as Christians is not to niceness.

But niceness is what we end up with if we keep our faith firmly under control as a sort of intellectual abstraction. Our bodies are the bits of us that register our strongest senses: pain, fear, anger, joy, jealousy – we flush, go pale, feel sick, feel that stone of foreboding lying heavy in our stomach….

But if we don’t feel, if those extreme emotions go un-listened-to, then our power to love and to act on love also withers away.

So shall we ask ourselves, this Lenten season, at what point our own power to respond to the full gamut of human need and relationship slid quietly away? At what stage our own ability to respond to God’s love shrivelled up and died? When did our faith become so abstract that we now fail to react to injustice? Walking into the Temple, would we really overturn the tables? Or would we turn away and keep moving?

At the Lent course this coming Wednesday, we welcome Lindsay Hurrell from CHESS, the charity which supports the homeless locally. With perfect - if entirely serendipitous 😊 - timing, given the weather we have experienced in the past week or so. She will be talking about the Rule from our Rule of Life that commits us to ‘assist others and to serve the needs of the local community’. (Do refer to your copy of the Lent challenge this week for ideas on how you might do this).

Symeon the New Theologian was a Christian monk who lived about a thousand years after Jesus, and his label of ‘theologian’ did not refer to any theorising or intellectualising about God as it tends to now, but rather to someone who spoke out of personal experience of the vision of God.

He wrote the following, which feels to me like a remarkably modern poem:

*For if we genuinely love him,  
We wake up in Christ's body  
Where all our body  
All over, every most hidden part of it,  
Is realized in joy in Him,  
And he makes us utterly real.  
So everything that is hurt  
Everything that seemed to us  
Dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged  
Is in him transformed  
And recognized as whole,  
As lovely and radiant in his light.  
He awakens as the Beloved  
In every last part of our body.*

I can’t say it better than that. **Amen**