

Sunday 19 March 2006: The Third Sunday of Lent

Communicating (with everyone else who's there – and who isn't)

Readings: Exodus 20: 1 – 17; John 2: 13 – 22

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Walk into any rural medieval or Reformation-era church that has not been greatly renovated, and you will most likely see a large board or painting on the wall listing the Ten Commandments. These were to be learnt by all villagers; they were the main guide to living. Their prominent display in the parish church said something about the Christianity that was taught there - that it was practical and to some extent rule-bound. Their display also indicated the nature of medieval and early modern society – that it was ordered and hierarchical, and the keeping of that order at a micro level (by individuals, within households) was essential to the keeping of order at the societal level – within the village, the county, the country as a whole. In a great chain of being extending down from God through the monarch and the ruling elite, down to the lowest farmworker, society's hierarchy was to be maintained through the following of rules and thus the keeping of good order.

In the modern, democratic world, the posting of the Ten Commandments would not be regarded as an effective way for the Church to communicate with or to the wider world. The old order has been profoundly challenged; unquestioned obedience to ones elders and so-called betters is no longer a lynchpin of society. We find other ways of regulating ourselves these days. Furthermore, the Church is much less entwined with the fabric of society as a whole – and hence, we Christians are faced with the perennial problem of how to communicate the Christian message of love and hope to and in a largely indifferent society. We tie ourselves in knots with worry about it, and spend a lot of time talking about a mission-shaped church.

One result of the whole shift from medieval and Reformation-era religion to religion in the modern day is that religious belief and practice have become more privatised. Ironically, this has made us more, not less, churchy. As a consequence, we Christians tend to assume that it is only what goes on in here – in our church buildings, when we are gathered together – that counts as effective communication. Our instinct is to gather in, rather than go out. Of course, a perceived division between 'the world' and 'the church', with 'the world' being regarded as a bad place, runs deep in the Christian tradition, but there is also a more general tendency to think that it is only what happens 'in here' that counts. Bums on pews are the order of the day – getting people in is supposedly a sign of how effectively we communicate with those out there. We operate almost entirely as the church gathered. The danger of this is that the church assumes it has all the answers and does not do a lot of listening to 'the world'. In reality, it is probably doing a lot of talking to itself.

At first glance, our reading from John this morning seems to underline this tendency. In cleansing the temple, isn't Jesus purifying it? Isn't he getting rid of the nasty 'world-ish' elements that have contaminated it? – the sellers of sacrificial offerings, the money changers. Well, there is an element of purification in his actions; of course. But if we probe deeper, we see that John is presenting another side to Jesus' actions, which is rather counter-intuitive to that initial reading of the text. What needs to be removed from the temple is the material for making sacrifices. The house of worship is not to be a house of trade precisely because the worship that God requires does not involve doves, cattle and sheep. Jesus' cleansing of the temple is one of the actions that leads to his conflict with the authorities – and it is interesting

that John places it right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, whereas the other three gospels all place this event at the beginning of Passion week, much more obviously placed as a source of the conflict which leads to Jesus' arrest and death. And it is Jesus' death that means that animal sacrifices will no longer be required, temples of stone no longer necessary. The incarnate God who died for us and was raised three days later eradicates the need for temples of worship precisely because he lived amongst us. And just as Jesus speaks of the temple of the *body*, when he says that the temple will be raised in three days, so it is, we discover, that God dwells *in us and with us*.

What our gospel reading this morning underlines is that we don't need temples of stone to encounter God and communicate our discovery of him to others – though such temples can be very useful from time to time. Jesus is not purifying the temple from the impurities of the evil world. He is in fact reminding us that through his body – literally his body, his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection – he is always in the world. Our mistake is that we keep on thinking over and over again that we have to bring Christ into the world. The fact is: he is already there.

What might this tell us about the church and communication in the twenty-first century? I make no apologies for turning back to the twentieth century for inspiration, and the work of one of the greatest Anglican churchmen of the first half of that century, Archbishop William Temple. Temple's constant reminder to the church was that there was no easy separation between the spiritual and the material. He believed that all human experience was 'religious' or could be interpreted religiously. Christ did not need to be brought into the world – Christ was, is, and will be already in the world. He had learnt this particularly from his experience in the sphere of adult education. Far from believing that the church had all the answers, Temple believed that the Church must listen to people's personal experiences. In this he foreshadowed the work of the Latin American Liberation Theologians. The person in community was, therefore, the focus of his analysis. He saw such personal experience as vital in the business of interpreting the gospel message for and in society: for Temple, you do not go straight to scripture or doctrine to find easy answers that you then unthinkingly apply to an ethical or social situation. There has to be an intermediate step – acquiring and assessing the evidence, listening to ordinary people's experiences and stories, harnessing the work of experts (economists, educationalists and so on), to the work of social transformation.

Christian communication is therefore a two-way process – at least two-way – and it doesn't all happen 'in here'. We must *communicate* as Christians – both listening and offering our experience to others – wherever we are. Communicating within the church gathered can only be a small part of this process. What we really have to learn is how to be what my friend Vincent Strudwick calls the church dispersed – communicating effectively with those who are like us, with those who seem different from us, with those who appear to be far away across a wide divide, wherever and however we are. In that bold attempt to listen and to speak, God dwells in us, as God lived on this earth as the man Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.