

Sunday 28 January 2024, Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Matins
Haggai 2. 1-9, John 2. 18-22
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

In nomine.

Those who were here at Matins last week will recall Mthr Emma's thoughtful sermon on the letter to Titus. In it, she reminded us that sometimes when the apostles talk about Christian behaviour their principal concern is not the behaviour itself, but rather how that behaviour reflects on the Christian message. How we live, our Christian character, serves either to attract or repel people from the gospel. But notice that in speaking this way, a distinction is drawn between our actions and the message. They relate to each other but are not the same. There is such a thing as the gospel, but that gospel is not reduceable to forms of action, morality, or ethics. In other words, the gospel is not simply a way of life which we hope others will find appealing and come to share. The Christian message is not 'be good people.' For the apostles, being 'good people' is both an outcome of receiving the gospel message, and a means by which the gospel message is made more palatable. But it is not the message itself.

This leads us to ask the essential question, if the gospel is not how I behave, what then is it? What is this good news we are called make appealing by means of our Christian character? What is the substance of the gospel we are called to proclaim? Let me suggest the answer to this question is quite simply: the person and work of Christ. What have we been celebrating since midnight on the 24th of December? The birth of Christ. What have we been celebrating since the 6th of January? The revelation of Christ's true identity to the world. What do we celebrate today, on Candlemas? The confirmation by prophetic testimony of all that had hitherto been revealed. And, at the risk of over-egging the preacher's pudding, what will we soon be celebrating in Lent and Holy Week? The suffering of Christ and his death on the cross for our sakes. This narrative of Jesus Christ is the gospel. What we are called to share with others is not ourselves and our actions, not a particular ethical system, not a way of thinking about the world. What we are called to share is Jesus and his actions.

In our lesson from John 2, Jesus is confronted by those unhappy with his clearing of the Temple. Having driven out the money-changers with their dishonest coinage, and the sellers of sacrifices at inflated prices, Jesus is asked by what authority he behaves so. And, rather than engaging his accusers in debate, he simply tells them to destroy the temple, and that he will rebuild it in three days. To us, listeners in as it were at the keyhole, Saint John says, *But he spake of the temple of his body.* Jesus' hearers knew that the temple had already been rebuilt, both fully and partially, several times. No one could accomplish this feat in three days. Already Jesus knows what is going to happen to him and it is this narrative he is interested in telling; ignoring the question he was asked, Jesus' focuses instead on the story of his own life because that is the most important message he can convey. Here already, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus gives us the key to understanding everything that is to come. It is as if he is saying to his disciples, Here is the heart of the message you are to proclaim. I will rebuild this temple in three days.

When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. This isn't about what you think should be going on, says Jesus to the crowd, because I have something more important to focus on and that is myself, my purpose. I am here, and the temple that is my body is more important than any earthly temple. It is more important than the code of behaviour you think reasonable. It is more important than your religious system. I am the only thing that matters and, though you may kill me, I will be rebuilt in three days. *The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace.*

As we turn from Christmas towards Lent, Holy Week, and the Cross of Christ, what is the message we are to take with us out into the world? Is it a code of propriety, the way things should be done? That is what the people in the temple were concerned about. Their own behaviour and their religious way of life concerned them so much that they missed the one whose very presence was meant from the beginning to fulfil their system of Law and be the answer to its demands. What are we to take with us from this service today and share with others? Only Jesus. Who he is: the one who died and was raised. What he has done: borne our sins and carried our sorrows and left them buried in the grave from which he leapt on the third day. That is our message, our good news for the world.

Our deepest desire should be to speak often the name of Jesus and to tell his wonderful works, with evangelistic fervour. For that was his concern, that he might be known for who he is, the Son of God who is the true temple and the person in whose face we see the face of God the Father. Jesus Christ, the deathless one came to give life and freedom from the Law's demands, not to impose another set of culturally mitigated behavioural expectations. He came to be our temple, that his name might be great among the Gentiles and that in every place incense should be offered unto his name. We proclaim: *The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace.* The latter house is Christ; in and by him God has given peace. May this living gospel of peace rule in your hearts on this final day of Christmas and always. Amen.