

Mark 11:15-19
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20)
“You Are God’s Temple”

Introduction

Palm Sunday is synonymous with spring: the promise of new life and a sense of hope that belies what is coming in the story of salvation. In less than a week, the mood of Jerusalem will change: the crowds of worshipers will give way to a bloodthirsty mob, and this One whom they hail as Savior will be crucified as a common criminal. Jesus knew all this when he entered the city.

All the way up to Jerusalem he tried to prepare his disciples for what was coming, but they refused to listen, refused to believe that things could possibly go any other way than according to their own hopes and dreams. They were so much like you and me. But Jesus entered the city in order to die. Indeed, it was for this death that he had lived his life, and now would offer that life as a perfect sacrifice in place of ours. “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

If all that happened that week were the betrayal, the trial, the suffering and death of Jesus, Palm Sunday would be a lie, a false celebration, a contradiction to the agony of the week to come. *But the week does not climax in the cross; it climaxes in the resurrection.* This season is not finally about death, but about life, not about betrayal, but about self-sacrificial love that brings the dawning of a new age, new life to those dead in sin, freedom to those in bondage, hope not only for God’s people, but for the whole creation.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a mission: a mission of salvation, not just for his ancient people Israel, but also for those “from every tribe and language and nation.” And at the heart of that mission was the promise that the God of Israel is the God of all nations, and that those of us who know him are no longer to live merely for ourselves but for the sake of those whom God is calling to himself from every people group on earth. This is at the heart of this scene at the Temple, a scene that brought Jesus into his final conflict with the authorities that made inevitable his arrest and trial.

In order to make sense of this text and to understand its relevance, we must remember the mission God has entrusted to us, his people, and consider how easily his people – both in Jesus’ day and in our day – forget the mission he has entrusted to us and begin to think that it is all about us, our desires, our dreams and tastes and preferences, our zones of comfort and our cultural identity. Those of us who have grown up within the church can easily think of this week simply as a delightful rite of spring, and so miss its meaning and fail to hear the call of Christ to join him on his mission of salvation.

Body

- 1. Consider first how God’s people had forgotten the mission entrusted to them.**

The Temple was the house of God, the place where Israel met with the living God and experienced his grace and forgiveness. The Temple served several needs within the house of Israel: it was a place of sacrifice for sin, a place to worship God, a place to learn his Word, a place to minister to the needs of the poor and broken through the giving of alms, and a place of mission to the nations. A special place, the Court of the Nations, had been set apart for those of the nations who had come to Jerusalem to learn about the god of Israel. This was in fulfillment of Israel's ancient calling to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 56:7).

In Jesus' day, the Temple had become the biggest business in Jerusalem. The priests did a lucrative business selling space in the Temple precincts to the merchants who had made the priestly caste of Sadducees rich and powerful. As a result, worship had become for many a matter of ritual and form, of buying the right animal and offering it at the right time, while saying the correct prayers. The heart worship that the Lord desires seems to have been in thin supply. It was a place of meeting with family and friends in familiar surroundings and celebrating one's unique culture.

There was little concern for outsiders, little concern for Israel's mission to the nations, and so there was little protest when the center of mission activity, the Court of the Gentiles, was leased to the merchants who sold animals for sacrifice, effectively disenfranchising the gentiles from the worship of the God of Israel.

2. Look at Jesus' response to a congregation that has lost its missional vision.

Jesus cleansed the Temple of all that would defile it and distract his people from the faithful pursuit of their mission. He did not make any effort to be nice or polite. His passion was for his Father's glory and for the salvation of the nations who did not yet know his Father, but who were supposed to learn of him by going up to Jerusalem and worshipping at the Temple. Now those Gentiles were pushed out, and God's people were busy buying and selling, without a passion to know God and to make him known to the nations. Jesus would have nothing of it: he drove out all those who thought that they could have God-honoring worship and heart-warming fellowship without faithful mission.

3. Consider some of the ways we may be tempted to lose our missional vision.

In order to consider that, we must first ask whether or not there is any place comparable to the Temple, where people are to worship God and make him known. Peter in his first letter describes us, the people of God, as God's house, each of us being used as building blocks fitted together to make what he calls "a spiritual house" where we will offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Paul makes this same point in his first letter to the church in Corinth, using the language of the temple and applying it in two senses: communally and individually. As a congregation of believers, we are a corporate temple, God's alternative to the surrounding culture with its idols and aspirations, the place where people should be able to meet the living God (1 Corinthians 3). And as individuals who have been saved by God's grace, we ourselves are God's temple (1 Corinthians 6).

So, the question we must ask is simply this: as individuals and as a congregation, is it our great passion to know Christ and to make him known in word and deed? Or have we removed whole areas of our life as individuals and as a congregation from those concerns, and given them over to a passion for the idols of our culture: namely, the relentless quest for whatever we think will make us happy, even when it comes to our worship and our fellowship with one another?

Whose glory are we seeking? Whose will do we long to see accomplished? What are we willing to give of ourselves to declare to the nations the good news of the One who gave himself to redeem us?

4. Finally, if we truly are God's Temple, what should be our response?

Let me suggest a few areas where we might need to do some Temple-cleansing:

As individuals:

Do we begin and end our day by offering ourselves in heartfelt worship to the One to whom we owe our lives, all we are and have?

Do we offer our bodies daily as a place for God to dwell, and through which he might shape his world?

Do we offer our resources daily as means through which he might accomplish his ends?

Do we offer to him those we love, asking him to use them to accomplish – not our purposes – but his?

Do we offer him our hopes, our dreams and desires, asking him to conform us to his image?

Do we increasingly respond in joyful obedience to his revealed will as we learn the spiritual worship of yielding even our bodies to him?

The practical effect is this: a life lived increasingly in fellowship with the living God, which will one day be revealed to have eternal significance in accomplishing God's will and extending his kingdom, not to mention a

growing sense of the love and joy and peace of the friendship of God for which we were created and redeemed.

As a congregation:

Are we ruthlessly evaluating our worship services to see whether or not they help draw us and outsiders who join us into a deeper, more joyful and passionate worship of God?

Are we ruthlessly evaluating our teaching ministries to see whether or not they are discipling us into a deeper love of God and of one another and a clearer vision of the mission entrusted to us?

Do we show the compassion of Christ through concrete diaconal ministries to those whom the world despises?

Are we ruthlessly evaluating our mission outreach to see whether or not we are reaching out to our community and to the world in ways that declare God's grace and glory in word and in demonstrations of his love and compassion, especially to those whom our culture would encourage us to despise?

Conclusion

As we enter this holiest of weeks, as we move in our memory through the passion week with our Lord Jesus and remember all that he endured in order to redeem us, let's consecrate ourselves afresh to the cleansing of our own lives through faith in Christ's sacrifice and with prayers to his Spirit to come upon us in power, cleansing us of all that would keep us from pursuing the mission entrusted to us, all that would keep others away from God, all that would cause them to stumble, all that might keep God's house from being "a house of prayer for all the nations."

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved