

Lent 3: DRIVEN OUT

John 2:13-16 [MW20-09]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 15 March 2020

A knock at the door brought the lady of the house face to face with a man of sad countenance. He said, "I am sorry to disturb you, but I am collecting money for an unfortunate family in your neighbourhood." He went on with great sympathy. "The husband is out of work, the kids are hungry, the power is about to be cut off, and worst of all, they are going to be kicked out of their home if they cannot get the rent money by this afternoon." The woman replied with great concern, "I will be happy to help, but who are you?" He replied, "I am the landlord."

What if someone stormed into your house

- tipped you out of your favourite armchair, or snatched the cooking utensils from your hands, or tossed you out of bed, or
- whipped the table cloth off the table screamed in your face: "you can't do that here!" then trashed the place before forcing you out onto the street???

How would you feel?

- would you think you had done anything wrong?

[space for thinking and answering]

Confused, angry, hurt, vengeful, embarrassed ...

- that I think is kind of how it was on that day when Jesus drove everyone out of the Temple
- they didn't think they were doing anything wrong they were just carrying on as normal in fact they were providing a service
- and, of course, being paid for it

The Law of Moses required that any animal offered for sacrifice be unblemished

- so at the Temple there were inspectors to make sure all animals offered for sacrifice were up to scratch
- naturally the best way to ensure animals were fit for sacrifice was to buy them on the spot and to pay the high price for guaranteed quality
- along with the inspection fee

Every Jewish male over the age of nineteen had to pay a Temple tax

- so there were tax collectors present in the Temple further, the tax could not be paid with secular coins as these bore the image of the Roman Emperor, who was worshipped as a god
- to place such coins in the Temple treasury would be an offence so there were money changers who could provide the right kind of coins
- at a price

The animal sellers and money changers set up shop in the outer court of the Temple

- to accommodate visitors' needs, but along with the tax collectors and inspectors they charged premium prices for their services!
- why do you think Jesus was so angry with this arrangement?
so angry that he drove all these sellers, collectors, exchangers and inspectors out?
(though they were probably all set up again by the next week!)

One thing it seems to me is that Jesus was angry not only with the sellers

- collectors, exchangers and inspectors
he was angry, and perhaps disappointed, with everybody
from the High Priest to the cleaner to the humblest pilgrim
- because they had lost the plot, forgotten what it was all about
perfect animals for sacrifice? ... that was not the point
- sacrifice was an offering to God, an offering from the heart
an offering from the life of the person
- as for money, surely it did not matter what coins were given?
it was after all a gift to God
- and this whole complicated system of inspectors and collectors
did God really want that?

The Jerusalem Temple was the sign of the presence of God

- it was a special place, the special place
to come and be aware of God's presence: to draw near to the living God
- a place to recall all that God had done for his nation and his people
the best place to offer prayers of thanksgiving
the best place to ask for God's help

And yet in Jesus' day, somehow, instead of bringing people closer to God

- the whole Temple experience seemed to move God further away
it was supposed to be a special place, home to all God's people
yet many of these people felt excluded, felt like outsiders
felt like they did not have the right to be there
- there was one particular group who had assumed the responsibility
for deciding who was in, who was out and how anyone could be there
- that's why Jesus was angry, furious, seething even - the whole thing was subverted

I wonder what might be the equivalent of the Temple be today?

- could it be our own church building, or our Cathedral?
the local Council Chambers? Parliament?

Reflecting on all that, I came up with this:

- all of us are part of something special, have something special, unique
a gift given to us, that has somehow been subverted
- perhaps not deliberately, but little by little
so much so that some people who supposedly belong
- feel like outsiders ... excluded
further away from God and life

Where? Our nation, Aotearoa, New Zealand, land of the long white cloud, God's own
- I think that today, this is what Jesus might be referring to
this country? Our country!

I remember when doing social studies at primary school, then history at high school
- being very proud of our nation
our pioneer spirit, our ingenuity, the way we welcomed people
the things we did together that made this country seem a 'paradise'

I remember feeling really good that we, Aotearoa New Zealand
- gave women the vote in 1893
the first country in the world to do so!
- I enjoyed learning about the great things that happened under the leadership
of Michael Joseph Savage
that started a trend in how we did things in this country
- we looked after people
with things like Social Welfare, State houses, old age pensions, Family Benefits
health care, Plunket, Dental nurses
- now I know things were far from perfect
however we seemed to be a little nation that could and did do great things
- in many areas of social care and responsibility we led the world
and our example inspired others

We were, as one author described it:

- "a half-gallon, quarter acre, pavlova paradise"
we were indeed "God's own" nation
a beautiful country, with plenty of space and good living standards
- our national song was "God Defend New Zealand"
sung loudly, with pride and no embarrassment
- we had school milk, which may not have been wonderful nutritionally
but it highlighted our attitude of caring
- there was hope and encouragement for everyone

Of course, I do have the advantage of being born and growing up

- in the relatively prosperous 60's
and studying our social history through the lens of the 70's

Looking at our nation now though, things seem very different

- it seems we are happy to say we are not a Christian country
for some it seems Christianity is something to be ashamed of and apologised for
- there are many Christians who seem quite okay
with us not being a Christian nation

A comparison of the 2006 and 2018 census tells us:

- in 2006 51 percent of the population professed to being Christian
in 2018 this was down to 37 percent
- non-Christian religions were 5 percent in 2006, 8 percent in 2018
and as for those having 'no religion' 34 percent in 2006, 48 percent in 2018

The importance of our faith and the esteem in which the church is held has changed markedly

- yet I wonder, would we have had the great reforms of the 1930s without the influence of Christians?
- would our great social policies have come about without Christian encouragement?

Once our country led the world in terms of healthcare, welfare and childcare

- a recent United Nations survey of children's well being put us around 25th out of all developed nations
- from number one to nearly last place

I think Jesus might look at our country in the same way he looked at the Temple

- it's not just the politicians, civil servants, business leaders
- it's all of us

Of course Jesus is not going to drive us out – into boats and into exile

- however he can drive us to have a fresh look at ourselves and our nation
- confront us with what is and what could be
- show us a place where all find a welcome
- where it's possible for people to know God and recognise they belong

Jesus chased people out of the Temple because they were getting in the way

- perhaps Jesus would look at us and our nation
- and see the things getting in the way
- the things preventing people from enjoying life in all its fullness
- and discovering they are sons and daughters of God

Perhaps Jesus would look and ask us:

- what are you doing with the land I gave you?
- do people see a Godly nation?
- do people see me?

I'm going to conclude by reading part of a poem

- and inviting you to meditate upon the words
- these are some lines from a poem by Thomas Bracken titled *New Zealand Hymn*
- you might know it better as *God Defend New Zealand*
- most of these words are not the ones we usually sing!

[hand out copies]

Read poem ...

*Let our love for thee increase,
May thy blessings never cease,
Give us plenty, give us peace,
God defend our free land.
From dishonour and from shame
Guard our country's spotless name,
Crown her with immortal fame,
God defend New Zealand.*

*May our mountains ever be
Freedom's ramparts on the sea,
Make us faithful unto Thee,
God defend our free land.
Guide her in the nation's van,
Preaching love and truth to man,
Working out thy glorious plan,
God defend New Zealand.*

[time for meditation, then prayer below]

Let us pray:
*O Lord, may our love for you increase,
as we seek to preach love and truth,
according to your glorious plan.
In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.*