

Not an Institution (John 2:1-12) – Encounters with Jesus 2: The Temple

People often say they don't believe in organised religion. There are some good reasons for that and at first glance it seems that Jesus is against organised religion when he clears out the temple precincts. On closer inspection we discover Jesus is concerned to reform the Temple and ultimately to replace it with something better.

The Unexpected Jesus

Last week we saw that the first miracle that John tells us about is Jesus turning water into wine. Many people think of God or Christianity as being anti-having fun, but here is Jesus not being a party pooper, but keeping the party going! This is one of the first impressions John wants to give us about Jesus.

And the next one is perhaps even more unexpected. We think of Jesus as being gentle, peaceful and 'nice'. But the next thing John tells us about Jesus is that he went into the Temple courts in Jerusalem and carried out almost a riotous demonstration against those trading there. That certainly wasn't a nice gentle thing to do! We have to ask is Jesus the kind of person you think he is?

The incident in the temple is of course, Jesus's first encounter in John's account with organised or institutional religion. At first glance you might say this is even a demonstration against organised religion... Not a comfortable idea if you are a vicar and are employed by the church!

"I don't believe in organised religion."

Many people today say that they like the idea of being spiritual, or finding comfort in religious beliefs, but they don't believe in organised religion. They don't like the idea of religious faith being bound up with ancient institutions and formal structures like churches.

But, why don't people like organised religion? For some it may be that they don't like the idea of getting up on a Sunday morning.

Yet the reality is there are some profound reasons behind disliking organised religion. Can I suggest three reasons why people today reject organised religion:

1. Private: They believe religion is only a private matter

Firstly, many people today believe religion should be a private matter. It's just between me and God, it is a deeply personal thing that brings me comfort, but is not something I should be sharing with others.

2. Power: They feel that organised religion is about power

The second reason that people reject organised religion is that they fear that it is a means to exert power over people. That it is used by leaders to manipulate and control people for their own ends.

3. Perverted: They look at the church today and feel it is not representing true Christianity

The third reason that people reject organised religion is that they look at the many churches today and see a form of Christianity that seems to be far from the ideals taught by Jesus. The church seems to pervert Christian faith or get in the way of Jesus, rather than drawing people to him.

Many people today reject organised or institutional religion, but is this what Jesus was doing when he cleared out the temple? Before we look a bit more at that incident lets look at a brief history of the Temple in the story of the Bible:

A Brief History of the House of God:

Gate of Heaven - Jacob's Dream

In Genesis 28 Jacob has a dream of angels going up and down a staircase. When he woke up he said:

"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:17)

The Temple was often called the house of God, Jacob sees it as a kind of gateway to God in heaven. This was the place of encounter with God.

Tabernacle - Moses and Israel in the Wilderness

Then when Israel had been rescued from being slaves in Egypt, God told Moses to build not so much a 'house of God', but a tent of God! The Tent could move with the people through the Wilderness showing God was present with them.

Moses set it up as the centre and focus for the people's encounters with God, seeking redemption and restoration through sacrifices.

Temple - Meeting place with God

Finally, once Israel were fully secure and established in the promised land, King Solomon, David's son built the first Temple in Jerusalem. This was modelled on the Tabernacle, but replaced it. Having the Holy of Holies in its midst.

Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the temple says:

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! ... Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling-place, and when you hear, forgive." (1 Kings 8:27,30)

In other words, the Temple was the symbolic centre of engagement with God in seeking his support, his forgiveness and his mercy. This was the gateway to heaven!

Solomon's temple was eventually torn down by the Babylonians, when the Jews were taken into exile. When the Jews later returned to Jerusalem they rebuilt a smaller version of the Temple. Then not long before Jesus was born, Herod the Great, Rome's puppet king in Jerusalem, commissioned another bigger and grander temple to be built for the Jews in Jerusalem.

When Jesus cleared out the Temple court, they had been building it for 46 years, but it was not fully completed until AD63. It was then destroyed by the Romans when they put down a Jewish rebellion in AD70.

Zeal for this House - Psalm 69:9

So was Jesus against organised religion? Was that why he performed this mini-riot in the Temple courts?

We'll look at what he says in verse 16: "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" Jesus was not protesting against organised religion or even the temple. He was protesting about the way the Temple was being run. It should have been a place for encounter with God, but it had become a place for making money. The purpose of the Temple was being perverted and this was what Jesus was protesting against.

The disciples were reminded of a verse in a Psalm in the Old Testament:

"Zeal for your house will consume me!" (Psalm 69:9)

Jesus was actually being zealous for an organised form of religion, the one prescribed in the Old Testament, but he was also zealous that it be reformed, so that it served its true purpose - to be a place of encounter with God.

Let's return to people's reasons for rejecting organised religion:

- **Private:** Clearly, Jesus does not believe religion is a private matter. Privatised religion does not care about how a religious institution is run, but Jesus cares deeply! He takes radical action to try and make the Temple into an effective public space for people to encounter God.
- **Power:** Secondly, Jesus is not about setting up a new religion to create a power base for himself.

The quote from Psalm 69, says that the zeal will consume him. When you go back to read Psalm 69, you discover its main theme is that many people are out to destroy the writer. 'Consume' here does not mean 'all consuming passion,' rather it refers to what people will do to the Psalmist because of his zeal.

In challenging the way the Temple was run in this way Jesus was setting himself against the power of the Temple authorities. They would be the ones who ultimately arranged for Jesus to be crucified. In a way they used the power generated by their organised religion to kill the Son of God. The story of the cross is a condemnation of the misuse of the power generated by organised religion.

But, Christianity itself is not about creating power for its leaders. Jesus was crucified - reduced to utter powerlessness in human terms. In fact, Christian leadership modelled on the cross is about serving others not gaining power over others as Jesus makes clear elsewhere.

- **Perverted:** Thirdly, Jesus felt the temple of his day needed reforming. He didn't reject organised religion, because it was perverted he sought to reform it, so that it could fulfil its rightful purpose.

And the church needs constant reforming. No church will ever be perfect, because it is run by sinful human beings. But as Christians we should be allowing Jesus to constantly reform us by his word.

So, Jesus is not against institutional or organised religion. He was about reforming it so that it could fulfil its right purpose.

But, just as the water into wine was a small pointer to something much greater, so this incident points to something much greater that Jesus was going to achieve.

Jesus and the House of God

The Temple was meant to be the 'House of God', but if you have read John's Gospel up to this point, you will already have seen pointers to something much more profound about Jesus. This radical attempt at reforming the temple was actually a pointer to a more radical coming truth - Jesus was the replacement of the Temple.

Let's rewind in John's gospel to see this more clearly:

Gate of Heaven - 1:51

At the end of chapter 1, Jesus tells the disciples:

"I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:51)

This is clearly a reference to Jacob's dream and when he says, 'Son of Man', Jesus is talking about himself. Jesus is claiming that they will see him as the house of God, the gateway to heaven.

Tabernacle - 1:14

More than that at the start of the Gospel, John has made an even more profound claim about Jesus, as the Word of God:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

The Greek word for 'dwelling among' is literally, 'tabernacled' a reference to the tent of God in the wilderness. Once again this is a claim that Jesus is the 'House of God'

Temple - 2:19, 21

Now when Jesus is challenged about what authority he had to clear the temple he says:

"Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19)

The authorities thought he was talking about the building in Jerusalem. How ridiculous, how could Jesus rebuild a building in three days that had already taken 46 years! It was a kind of riddle. But, when they did destroy Jesus by having him crucified, and he rose from the dead on the third day his disciples realised which Temple Jesus was talking about:

John makes it clear in verse 21:

"The temple he had spoken about was his body." (John 2:21)

The Temple had been the place where you encountered God, where you sought his help and forgiveness through prayer and sacrifice. The Temple was the centre of the Jewish religion.

But for Jesus important as the Temple was it was only a pointer to himself: He would become the Temple, He would be the place you encounter God, He would be the sacrifice that brought forgiveness of sins, He would be the person through whom we seek God's help. For Christians the centre of our faith is not a building or an institution, but Jesus himself.

Yes, there needs to be religious organisations and institutions. But for Christians their role must be to point people to Jesus as the Way to God, not to replace Him as the Way or to become a barrier to people finding Jesus.

So will you come to Jesus?

- **Not to become** a member of an institution, but to become a child of God and a brother of Christ.
- **Not to be controlled** by people, but to learn how to be led by Jesus
- **Not to be content** with a failing organisation, but working with others zealous for the restoration of the church.