

## **Christ - the Ultimate Temple**

### **John 2:13-22**

Today we're starting a new series on the Controversial Jesus, and we're going to look at the things Jesus said that got him into trouble, and why, and what that teaches us about him.

And we're going to begin by looking at the passage that Cooper read to us, where Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19)

And we're going to look at two things: *Why* was that so controversial? And what it means for us?

#### **The Staggering Nature of What Jesus Said**

Now, have you heard the expression, 'it got him killed'? Someone falls into bad company, gets involved with a gang, and 'it got him killed'. Or someone came by some information that someone else didn't want coming out and 'it got him killed.'

Well, this comment by Jesus, 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up', does that seem all that much to you? It certainly doesn't sound all that shocking to our ears, does it? And yet, it was so controversial when he said it that it literally got him killed.

And I say that because the gospel writers tell us that it was this statement, or at least a garbled account of it, that was used in evidence against him at his trial. Mark 14:56-58, 'For many bore false witness against him, saying, "We have heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands."' When he was hanging on the cross, people taunted him, using this against him: Mark 15:29, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!" And months later, in the trial of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, this saying was raised again by the prosecution: Acts 6:13-14, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [the temple] and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

So, why was it so controversial? Well, when you understand it, I hope you'll see it's no less controversial today.

But, to understand it, ask yourself, what are temples for? And, specifically, what did the temple in Jerusalem stand for?

Last year, Su and I visited Taiwan for Josh and Doris' wedding. And on a walk outside Taipei we passed a temple. It was all red and gold and glitz. And the smell of incense was everywhere. And there, right at the back of the temple, made from gold, was the god. And this was his house, and his worshippers came to kneel and pay homage.

And that's a temple is, isn't it. The house of the god the temple is dedicated to. It's where you can meet with your god. It's where heaven and earth meet; where the materialistic, natural world intersects with the supernatural. And people go to a temple to try and connect to the divine.

And as Christoph reminded us in the podcast on Friday, instinctively people know that beyond the reality of this life, there's something else, some ultimate, spiritual reality, that's out there, but that

we can't quite grasp. And people build temples to try and help you connect with that ultimate. In some way, they offer to mediate the divine to you. To answer that searching in your heart.

Now, here in the West someone might say, 'oh, I'm not into all that religious mumbo jumbo stuff. I'm spiritual but I'm definitely not religious. I don't need a temple to help me feel closer to God - nature, the mountains, does that for me.'

But if that's how you respond, can you see, how you're still acknowledging exactly what the temple is saying: you're looking for that ultimate, to connect with the spiritual, and you know there's a gap between you and it, and you need something to help you bridge that gap. And nature serves as your temple.

But a truly secular person might say, 'well, I'm neither spiritual or religious. I have zero temples, natural or man made.' Except you do. Just take a walk into any new shopping mall and consider how it's designed like a cathedral - a cathedral to consumerism. Before lockdown, we visited a food mall here in Lausanne. And it is remarkable. It is literally built as a temple to food. Even to the point of having a raised altar, which ironically was the meat counter.

Now you might think, 'yeh, but that's not a temple!' Except they are, aren't they. They're telling you, there is this other life out there, the good life, and we can mediate that life to you. The life you really want. And we even have priests, our assistants, on hand to help you achieve it. A life where if you buy the right products, cook the right food, wear the right clothes, do the right things, you can enter this new life, and feel good and at peace and know you've made it. They're offering to mediate the ultimate to you.

Ok, but what about the Jewish temple? Well, if pagan temples offer to mediate the divine, think what the temple in Jerusalem stood for. When Solomon built it, he held an inauguration service for it, and 2 Chronicles 7:1 describes how 'fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.' And because God's glory filled it, the priests couldn't enter it. Instead everyone found themselves prostrate, on the ground, in worship.

So, whilst a pagan temple claims to be the house of a deity, of an idol, Jerusalem's temple was the dwelling place of God's glory: his presence on earth. The same glory that when it came down on Sinai the people saw it and trembled. The same glory that when Moses asked God, "Please, show me your glory" God replied, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33:18, 20). In other words, you can't see God's glory and survive the experience.

And that glory dwelt in the temple at Jerusalem. The temple was like the nuclear core at the heart of Israel's worship. It wasn't just the dwelling place of some golden idol, it was the dwelling place of Yahweh, the creator God.

And it was the place of sacrifice: where sacrifices were made for the sins that cut the people off from the glory of God; the sacrifices that meant they could survive having the glory of God in the centre of their city. That meant they could relate to God as their God.

And it was the place of prayer, that brought the power of God's presence and reality and goodness into their lives.

So, if any temple claimed to mediate the divine, how much more did this temple. The place where, literally God and man, and heaven and earth met.

And Jesus walks into that temple, makes a whip and drives all the livestock, all the money changers, all the tradesmen out of it, saying, v16, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”

As one commentator puts it, so much for gentle Jesus meek and mild!

Now, imagine if I turned up at Dan and Mia’s house one day, barged in and started clearing out all their cupboards and throwing their contents out the window. Or started dragging their furniture out onto the street, saying, ‘right, this is all going!’ What would they say? Have you lost your mind? You can’t do that! This is our house!

So when Jesus cleanses the temple it’s about as dramatic a picture of the ownership of, and authority over, the temple that he’s claiming, as it’s possible for him to make. Plus, it’s a direct attack on the whole system the priests have created, of turning the temple and the mediation of the divine, into a money-making business.

And so the authorities demand to know, v18, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” I mean, who do you think you are? If you’re claiming some kind of divine mandate to do this, then you’d better prove it with a miracle.

And that’s the context for Jesus saying, “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” But, John tells us, v21, ‘He was speaking about the temple of his body.’

What’s the sign of his authority, his ownership of the temple? It’s his death and resurrection. But he’s saying more than that, isn’t he. He’s saying that in him, in his body, destroyed, torn down, and raised again, God is mediated to us. That’s he’s the true, the ultimate, temple

That in him, in his physical body, heaven and earth meet. That he’s the dwelling place of God’s glory. As the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘He is the radiance of the glory of God’ (Heb 1:3). As John said, ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). That just as the glory of God filled the temple in Solomon’s day, so it filled him.

That is some claim, isn’t it? That in him God and Man met.

But remember, the temple wasn’t just the dwelling place of God, it was the place of sacrifice. And Jesus is saying that in his body, destroyed and raised up, atonement for sin is going to be made that will make all other sacrifices obsolete. That the gulf between us and God, that all of us know, is finally bridged.

But not just the place of sacrifice, but the place of prayer. That through him prayer, effective prayer, prayer that brings the glory and the goodness of God into your life, becomes possible. He’s saying that through his death and resurrection he will do all that the priests tried to do, and intercede before

God on our behalf. That what ever you're facing right now, Christ, crucified, risen and ascended is at the Father's right hand, praying for you.

So when Jesus says, 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up' he's saying that *he's* the epicentre, the nuclear core, the ground of all true worship. That he's the ultimate dwelling place of God's glory, where heaven and earth meet; the ultimate sacrifice; the ultimate priest; the ultimate intercessor.

Now, think how radically different the claims of Christianity are to anything else on offer: Where is its holiest place? Where is its temple? Where are its sacrifices? Where are its priests? And the answer to all those is: Jesus.

Now, do you see why that was and is so controversial? Because it tells you, in the death and resurrection of Christ, every other temple, every other religion, then and now, is redundant. It's past its sell-by-date.

So, what flows out of that?

### **The Implications for Us**

And I want to give you four.

Number one: He is the One; The exclusive one. And it's only through Jesus that you can genuinely encounter God. Now, if you're not yet a Christian, you *will* get plenty of other offers. Those cathedrals to consumerism will tell you, 'have this and you'll find the life you want.' Other religions, or other religious practices, will say, do this and we can connect you to the spiritual. We'll mediate the divine to you. And even if you are already a Christian, those things can tempt you.

But listen, the life that these other things material or spiritual - offer you is a pale imitation of the life you could have in Christ. Because he stands apart from all these other claims and says, 'no, it's in me, and in my death and resurrection, that you will find what it is you are really looking for. I'm the temple.'

Secondly, the fact that Jesus cleanses the temple before saying this tells you, you can't buy your way in; you can't earn your way into the kind of life you're looking for. You see, you know that there is this spiritual reality that you want to connect to. You know the materialistic, atheistic world view fails to answer the questions of your heart. You know there is so much more than materialism can offer you. And if you're not yet a Christian, and you want to connect with God, you might think, I've got to earn my way there. I've got to deserve, I've got to make myself worthy to attain, to take hold of the divine. Which is exactly what every other religion will tell you.

Or if you are a Christian, you too can think that 'yes, Jesus is the way for me to be saved, by once saved, for God to hear my prayer, or for me to atone for my sins, I've got to earn it.'

But when you think you can pay your way in, or buy your way to God, or earn salvation or try and be worthy of enlightenment or blessing or forgiveness, what are you doing? You're turning the temple into 'a house of trade' as Jesus calls it here, just as much as the religious leaders were doing in their day.

Instead, when Jesus says, 'I'm the temple' he's saying, it's through me, through what I have done, through my death and resurrection that all of this can be yours. It's not by your doing, it's by my grace.

Thirdly, because Jesus is the temple, you are too. Not in the way he is, but because of his death and resurrection, as you put your faith in him, God's Spirit comes and dwells in you. As Paul says, 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.' (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Now, when Jesus cleansed the temple, John writes, 'His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17). And Jesus has lost none of his zeal for his house. And as we understand that it's through him that we can draw near to God, that's not going to result in an 'anything goes' kind of life, it's going to result in cleansing - in sanctification, in Jesus addressing things in our lives, and saying, time for this to go.

So if you're going through a time when you are increasingly aware of your sin, and that there is stuff in your life that needs to change, and it's uncomfortable, that's not a sign that Jesus has withdrawn from you, it's a sign he's at work in you, cleansing his temple. So let him do just that.

But fourthly and finally, we're being made into God's dwelling place *together*, not just individually. Look at what Peter writes, 'As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house' (1 Peter 2:4-5). In other words, because he is the ultimate temple, Christ is building us *together* into his temple.

There's a film about the First World War, where, in the final minutes before the war ends, one of the soldiers, who knows the war is nearly over, sticks his head above the trench to have a look round, and gets shot. The end was so close and he got complacent.

And as lockdown begins to end, and you think the war is nearly over, don't get complacent. And I'm not talking about hand washing! I mean don't get spiritually complacent. You're young, you're fit, so COVID-19 hasn't exactly been an existential threat to you, it's been more of an inconvenience. But for you, as lockdown begins to end, spiritually speaking, the danger may just be beginning. Because now you can get on with life, you can re-fill your time, and in the process neglect doing what you can do to stay connected to the people of God Jesus is building you up with.

But you'll never experience the fullness of the Christian life on your own, or by watching on-line services, however good, or amateur, they are. So, as restrictions lift, do all you can, in whatever ways you can, to connect with God's people as Christ builds us up together.