

The True Temple

John 2:12-25

As you travel round Sydney these days, the landscape's changed from when I was growing up. It's quite dramatic really. There are now temples and similar things all over the place. That wasn't the case 45 years ago when I was a boy – there were plenty of churches, but no temples. It's all changed now.

- I think the first thing like this to go up was the Moslem mosque at Lakemba – my guess would be the 1970s. I looked up the internet – there are now over 20 mosques in Sydney.
- Sometime in the late 90s, I noticed a new Buddhist temple on King Georges Road at Wiley Park. And again, the internet reveals several more in different parts of Sydney.
- Also in the late 90s, we visited a church at Cabramatta. Some sort of temple was a couple of doors down from the church – looked Chinese, but I don't really know.
- I don't remember when I first noticed the Hindu temple at Mays Hill – just west of Parramatta. And, from the mid-90s on, I often noticed Hindu shrines in various shops around the place.

They've popped up all over the place. It's all part of Sydney's multiculturalism. Many are quite ornate and outwardly impressive. They look rich and attractive. Yet most of them are only in the junior league compared with other parts of the world. Think of the pictures you've seen of temples in Thailand and Kampuchea. Humanity builds all types of structures and tries all sorts of means to communicate with the various gods they believe are out there somewhere.

First-century Jerusalem also had a temple. This temple too was quite impressive for its time.

- Originally it was built by wise King Solomon about 950^{BC}. But that version was totally destroyed by the Babylonians in 587^{BC}. They took most of the people captive to Babylon.
- When the Jewish people returned 70 years later, they rebuilt it. It wasn't as impressive as the first edition – the people returning from captivity simply didn't have the sort of resources Solomon had. As the centuries passed, it was severely damaged – maybe even destroyed.
- It was reconstructed by Herod. He began work around 20^{BC}. He virtually doubled the foundation compared with Solomon's day. He finished major construction within about 10 years. The additional adornments and more detailed work continued for many more years – thus the 46 years mentioned in verse 20. It still wasn't finished. Even so, its beauty was renowned throughout the Roman world.

This temple was unique. It certainly wasn't the only temple in the world at that time – there were myriads of temples inhabiting the Roman world – temples built to all sorts of gods and by all sorts of people. But this was the only temple in the entire world authorised by the God who created the universe. This was where He'd placed His name. This was where He'd promised to meet His people. It alone was the temple where you could offer acceptable sacrifice. It alone was the temple towards which you could pray and hope to have your prayers answered. Every other temple was false and dedicated to the worship of false gods.

Jesus Comes to the Temple

And it's to this temple that Jesus comes. It's the time of the Passover. The Passover was a special Jewish feast commanded by God. It remembered when God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It reminded them the angel of death passed over their houses and killed the first-born sons of the Egyptians. The story's in Exodus. It was a special feast and each year many made the religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate it. Great crowds occupied Jerusalem at this time – it's said the population swelled by five times.

When Jesus arrives at the temple, what's He find? It seems something like Paddy's Market or the Bathurst Show. There's simply noise everywhere – not the quiet noise of people murmuring prayers, but the loud noise of people doing business and animals complaining about their conditions. The scene appeared chaotic.

What's going on here? We need to realise these things John speaks of in verse 14 were all related to the proper operation of the temple. These guys are providing proper services necessary for people attending the temple.

- The animals are for people to purchase for sacrifice. Some people travelled a long way – maybe even came by boat from the far-flung reaches of the Empire. They came to offer sacrifice to God. It could be difficult to bring the sacrifice all that way with you. The animal might die on the journey. It may get some defect while walking along the dusty roads and thus no longer be acceptable under the sacrificial regulations. Besides, you'd have to keep feeding it on the journey. Much easier to buy an

appropriate animal once you got to Jerusalem.

- The money-changers were there to help people pay the temple tax. Every Jewish male of 20 years or over was required to pay this tax for the upkeep of the temple and its services. The general currency of the empire was not considered suitable for paying the temple tax. It had an image of Caesar on it and, since Caesar considered himself a god, it wasn't thought appropriate to use that coinage for the temple tax. Moreover, the silver content of those coins tended to be questionable. Thus, the temple authorities required that this tax be paid in Tyrian coinage. And so money-changers were available to help people meet their religious obligations.

These were essential services for the operation of the temple. And there's no suggestion in this text that these people were corrupt in their practices. They'd make something for their services, of course – but there's no hint here that they're ripping-off the religious tourists.

The problem was the location of their business. In earlier times, the animal merchants set up shop on the Mount of Olives – across the valley from the temple. But now they're actually in the temple itself. And the noise they made was a significant distraction from prayer. People came to the temple to pray and offer sacrifice. This noise of all this business made concentrating difficult. Don Carson notes: "Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there is noisy commerce"¹.

More significantly, I think these things happened in the

¹ D.A.Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991) 179.

Court of the Gentiles. In the temple there were three main courts for the ordinary people – the people who weren't priests.

- There was the Court of the Gentiles where anyone could go.
- Beyond that was the Court of the Women. Only Jewish people could enter that. There were signs posted round the temple saying that any Gentile person (that is, any non-Jew) found beyond the Court of the Gentiles was responsible for his/her own death.
- Beyond that was the Court of the Men. Only Jewish men could enter that court.

So, for Gentiles, there's only this one court in the temple they could enter – and that court's now filled with animals and money-changers. There's no longer room for Gentiles to approach God.

When Solomon built and dedicated the temple, he prayed for the foreigner. It's in 1 Kings 8:41-43 (also 2 Chronicles 6:32-33)

As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name – for men will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm – when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear you, as do Your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name.

Provision was made for the foreigner. This was picked up by the prophets (eg, Is.56:6-8; Zech.8:20-23). They

spoke of the nations coming to acknowledge God. For God's not just the God of Israel – He's the God of the whole earth. He made it all and it all belongs to Him. He rules it all – Jews and Gentiles alike. And so it's right and proper that all nations acknowledge Him.

But Jesus finds that the Gentiles can't get in. Their place in the temple's taken over by merchants. So Jesus shows His zeal for His Father's house – He kicks out the merchants. He's upset the foreigner can't come to God. He's upset all this business activity squeezed the foreigner out. Part of the very purpose of the temple was that all peoples on earth may know and fear God – and it wasn't happening. There was something drastically wrong at the heart of Jewish culture and religion.

Jesus is motivated by a zeal and passion for His Father – a loyalty and love for Him. He Himself wants to hallow the name of God the Father. He wants God's name truly honoured. He wants the earth to know the God of Israel – not just the people of Israel, but peoples of all nations. He wants the world to fear and worship this God. He's jealous for His Father. And so He drives the merchants out. He puts right that which is wrong.

The disciples' reaction's recorded in verse 17. They've seen the first sign – turning the water into wine – and they've believed in Jesus. Now they see Jesus fixing up the abuse of the temple and they remember what the Scripture says:

Zeal for Your house will consume Me.
The quotation comes from Psalm 69:9.

The point is these words which originally came from the

lips of King David – and refer to a very difficult period in David's own life when he faced much opposition – these words fit equally this current situation with Jesus. Jesus is concerned that things be done properly at the place God designated as His temple. That very concern attracts opposition. Ultimately, as John tells us later, that concern consumes Jesus – it leads to His crucifixion and death.

Jesus' Challenge about the Temple

However, there's also another response – a very different response to what Jesus did. Not surprisingly, the Jewish authorities aren't very happy with Jesus' actions. In verse 18, they ask Jesus for some indication of His authority to do what He's just done.

Now, of course, these Jewish authorities had every right to ask Jesus this. The temple was in their jurisdiction. They were responsible for what went on. Especially, they were responsible to make sure there were no riots in the temple. They didn't want to draw out the Roman soldiers in retaliation. So, they had the right to question Jesus. But there are two problems with what they do here.

- First, they don't actually ask whether what Jesus did was right. They're upset Jesus disturbed the status quo, but they aren't upset with the abuse of the temple. There's something wrong at the heart of their religion and they don't even notice it. They'd done nothing to get rid of the abuse. They may even have encouraged it. They didn't demonstrate zeal for the temple of God. And they don't ask themselves whether Jesus' zeal for God is actually a right zeal.
- Secondly, in asking for a sign, they show unbelief. Jesus does provide signs that people may believe in

Him, but, in John's gospel, whenever someone asks for or demands a sign, it indicates they don't believe. God isn't domesticated in that way, such that He'll produce signs on demand to win allegiance. Indeed, if they had eyes to see, they'd have reacted as the disciples. They'd have thought about the Old Testament and seen that clearing the temple already was a sign.

However, Jesus does offer them a sign – a challenge. Verse 19:

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.

The challenge is quite ambiguous. Naturally, the authorities think Jesus refers to Herod's Temple. After all, that's where this exchange takes place. That's the temple Jesus just threw into uproar. That's the temple about which they question Jesus' authority.

Even at that level, what Jesus offers is a very appropriate sign. Such a sign would indeed be impressive. To build a complete temple within three days of its destruction – even the team from Backyard Blitz with all their modern day equipment and machinery would struggle with that one. That would indeed be a powerful sign. It'd demonstrate His authority in relation to the temple and its practices. But the authorities don't take Jesus' challenge. They don't start ripping down the temple.

But, in fact, Jesus isn't talking about that temple. Rather, He's talking about His own body. He's come to replace the temple of bricks and mortar. He says: destroy this temple – this body – and I'll raise it up again in three days. The authorities misunderstand the sign offered.

But why can Jesus refer to His own body as a temple?

Well, what's a temple? A temple is:

- A place where God's presence is.
- A place where sacrifice is brought to God.
- A place where there's transaction between man and God.

Who's Jesus? John doesn't use the term, but Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. We find that out from another gospel – Matthew. The way John expresses it is that Jesus is the eternal Word become flesh; He's God become man. In Jesus, God's presence truly dwells, for He is God. He's the place where God and man truly meet. And, as we'll find out later in John's gospel, Jesus is the one true sacrifice made to God.

The place where God will meet man now isn't made of bricks and mortar. The place where God dwells with His people now isn't sitting on some mount in Jerusalem. Rather it's in a human body – God dwells in the person of Jesus. When Solomon first dedicated the temple, he acknowledged that no human building could contain God (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 6:18). God's so big that even the heavens don't contain Him – how much less could a mere temple, a mere human building? But, Paul tells us in Colossians 1:19

For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Jesus...

And in Colossians 2:9

In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

All of God's in Jesus. You see Jesus, you see God. Jesus is the true temple.

Jesus replaces the old temple building with Himself. Yes, that was the only authentic temple in the world. This was the only one sanctioned by the true God. But He had it built for His purposes – and those purposes were forward-looking. During the whole Old Testament period the temple and the sacrifices that happened there pointed forward to something better God would do. They weren't God's final word.

- The animal sacrifices couldn't deal in any final way with human sin. How could a mere animal's life pay for human rebellion?
- And the temple itself prevented people getting too close to God. God's presence was there, but they had to keep their distance. They couldn't get into the inner sanctuary. Their sin was a barrier.

The whole system pointed forward to something better – and now that something better arrived in the person of the Word become flesh. The old system is now obsolete.

Ultimately the Jewish leaders do accept Jesus' challenge, although they don't realise it. They do destroy the temple – Jesus' body. They hang it on a cross until it's dead. Then they seal it in a tomb. It's His zeal for His Father that consumes Him to the very point of His death. But, as Jesus says, in three days He'll raise it again. Jesus, the true temple, doesn't stay dead. Rather, He's raised from the dead. Death can't hold Him. He actually provides the sign they demand – but they don't recognise it. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Conclusion

This concept of Jesus being the true temple had, and continues to have, wide-reaching implications. It's in Jesus that God and man meet. In Jesus, the temple

established in the Old Testament is fulfilled. In the Old Testament, the temple reminded people that approach to God is difficult. For what did the people experience when they came? They could only get so far and no further.

- They could only get as far as the priests who had to offer the sacrifice for them. They couldn't even put their own sacrifices on the altar.
- And not even the priest who offered that sacrifice could get into God's presence. A heavy curtain veiled that section off. People and priests weren't allowed in. Only the high priest could enter for a short period of time once a year.

Access to God was very restricted.

But that's now changed. In Jesus, God became man. In Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for human sin was made. Now men and women everywhere may approach God directly. Hebrews 10:19-22 says:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance ...

The way to truly approach God is now open – and it's open for all who wish to come – but only through Jesus.

The early Christians were accused of atheism. Why? Because they had no idols and no temples. They didn't build temples because they knew Jesus is the true temple. And, further than that, as the concept's developed in other parts of the New Testament – we don't have time to go into it fully now – they knew they too became God's

temple as God's Spirit took up residence in them. God's temple is expressed in people, not buildings. But it's only as those people became joined to the true temple – Jesus.

And so today also, we don't build temples – at least, not with bricks and mortar. Church buildings aren't temples. Nor should they be made to look like temples, for that would give outsiders a false impression. We don't have altars in our buildings where we offer blood sacrifices, for that would deny the one, perfect, complete sacrifice Jesus Himself made for us. We don't have a priestly group of people who officiate between God and the people. We all have direct access to God through Jesus Himself – we don't need any intermediaries.

Further, there are no specially holy places. Church buildings are useful for meeting together – but they're not essential. We use a school hall. Church buildings aren't more holy than other places. God isn't more present in a church building than anywhere else. My prayers don't become more effective because I offer them inside a church building. They're equally effective everywhere – because through Jesus I have complete access to God from everywhere.

And true worship's no longer tied to a particular place. Rather, it's tied to the person of Jesus. That's why Paul can write in Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.

Worship isn't what we come to church to do. Worship's our whole lives lived under the authority of King Jesus.

It's our whole lives offered as sacrifices to be lived for God's glory. It's our whole lives lived in proper relationship with the true temple – Jesus. Not just what happens for a couple of hours in a church meeting on a Sunday – but every single part of them.

So, Jesus came to this temple – the only authentic temple in the world – and He replaced it. He's the reality the temple symbolised.

- He's where God and man meet.
- He's the one true acceptable sacrifice for sin.

Because of Him, we may come into the very presence of God and not be afraid – not be struck down in judgment. We can become children of the living God by believing in Jesus.

Two final questions.

- First, Jesus is the true temple that makes all other temples obsolete. There is no other authentic way to approach God. He is the only way. Do you believe in Jesus?
- Secondly, Jesus is the true temple because He's God become man. Because He's God, believing in Jesus means giving Him my total allegiance. Some saw the miracles He did and weren't willing to do that – you can see that in verses 23 to 25. The question is: Have you done that? Do you trust Jesus enough to follow Him totally – to turn your life upside-down so it's no longer lived for you but for Him?