

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE:

We're in a series on Jesus' final week on earth. A period known as the passion, or the ordeal, of his crucifixion. However, there was more to his last week than that. There were conflicts and confrontations, betrayals and beatings, visits to the Temple and even visits to Hades.

People were thinking, hoping, calling for him to lead the entire nation, to declare independence from Rome, and to set up a new dynasty. Now he was coming to the most holy of cities, the place of the great Temple and the heart of the Jewish faith, as well as the heart of the Jewish people. If he was going to meet their expectations it would happen in Jerusalem.

The city was already in adrenaline overdrive as it was the Passover, the most celebrated of all Jewish events. Thousands of pilgrims would be filling its streets, full of religious energy. The Passover was the festival of festivals. It celebrated what God had done through Moses in leading the Jewish people out of bondage from Egypt.

The Jewish historian Josephus writes that on one occasion, more than two and a half million people came to Jerusalem for the Passover. The population of Auckland is a little over 1.7 million, but we are spread out. These pilgrims all descended on the city of Jerusalem.

Then finally, those closest to Jesus knew that this would be the climax of his ministry. He had been telling them all along that everything he was doing and teaching was moving toward Jerusalem. Let's look at how this is charted in Luke's biography of Jesus.

⁹ "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Luke 9:51. ³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. Luke 10: 38. ²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Luke 13:22.

Then in Luke chapter 18, Jesus made it clear that when he got there, it wasn't exactly going to be like everyone thought. Here is what he said. **³¹ Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. ³² He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; ³³ they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again. Luke 18: 31-33.**

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers. Mark 11: 15-17.

What does this tell us about the kind of person Jesus was? Most people have one of these thoughts about Jesus. The first one is soft, spoken and sensitive like Winnie the Pooh. This is the Jesus who never raises his voice, who never gets mad or angry. This is the Jesus who speaks softly. It's a nice Jesus. A good Jesus. A Jesus full of grace. Then there's the second camp who sees Jesus a little differently than Winnie the Pooh.

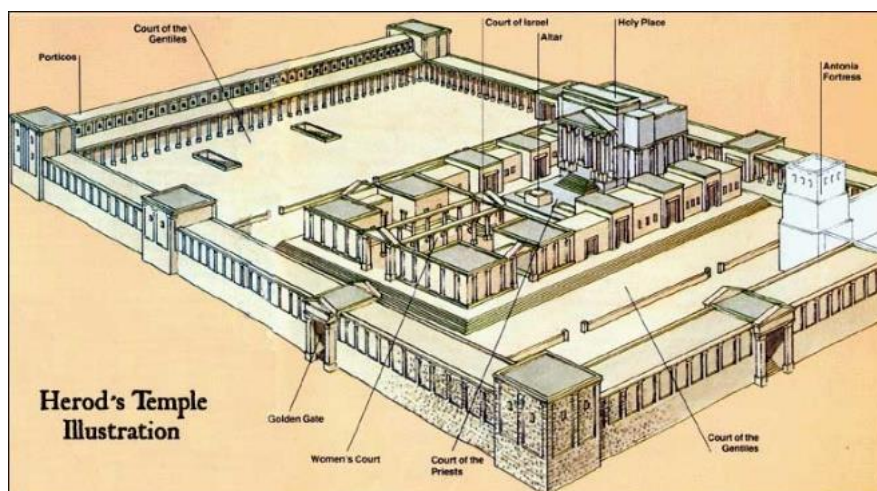
This camp sees Jesus as strong, revolutionary, willing to fight and go to war. Someone who stands against injustice, and for freedom. Kind of like William Wallace from Braveheart. This is the Jesus who walks through the world kicking butt and taking names. If the first Jesus is full of grace, this one is full of truth. So which one is Jesus? Is he Winnie the Pooh or Braveheart? What if he was a mix of both? What if the answer is "Yes"?

It reminds me of how C.S. Lewis described the great lion Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia. If you haven't read those books, oh my goodness, begin at once. They are classics and so, so much better than the films. They tell the tale of four children who enter a magic wardrobe into a land called Narnia, where animals talk, and all kinds of wonderful magic and adventure awaits. There's also a bit of an allegory with Aslan the lion representing Jesus. Listen to how he is described to the four children when they first enter Narnia and learn about him from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver.

"Is - is he a man?" asked Lucy. "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

That is a deep truth. Jesus is good, but not necessarily safe. This morning we're going to dig into the side of him that might be a bit more on the William Wallace side of things. Where he was good, but not safe.



Now, let's start off by talking about the Temple itself. The Temple was the centre of Israel's worship and was viewed as the very dwelling place of God. As you can see here, there were two courts. An outer court, or the court of the Gentiles, and then an inner court. The outer court encircled the inner court. The inner court was not open to just anyone. It was only for

those committed to the faith. That is where you had such things as the Holy Place with the Altar of Incense and beyond that, the Holy of Holies, which when originally built by Solomon: it held the Ark of the Covenant. The outer court was for everyone interested in what the Temple represented which was finding God, connecting with God.

It was open to anyone, Jew or Gentile. Anyone could enter, pray, walk through it. In fact, that is what it was designed for. Its purpose was to provide a place where non-Jews could encounter God and get right with God. However, there is a problem. That's where the money changers and animal sellers had set up shop. That's the space they took over. So, the inner court of the temple has been taken over by commercial activity.

The background of this event is central to understanding what takes place here. In the outer courts, items necessary for sacrifice were sold, animals, wine, oil, salt, and doves. This exchange had a built-on surcharge which went to the high priest's family. So, money was being extracted from gentiles and alike. The door was completely closed to the poor, the sick and the marginalised. It was even being used as a cut-through street for people bringing in deliveries to the city. It had become polluted and defiled. Anything but a place reflective of God.

Jesus immediately begins to drive out all who are buying and selling. He overturns tables of money changers and benches of those selling doves. The noisy commerce prevents the temple from being a house of prayer for all nations. He is irate that profane, commercial activity has intruded into the sacred space of the temple and desecrated the spiritual place of worship.

"The sacrifice of animals will not allow them to evade the doom that God purposes for those guilty of lying, stealing, violence and adultery". David E Garland, NIV Application Commentary on Mark.

Jesus' action here has often been called a 'cleansing' of the Temple, implying that Jesus is attempting to purify the Temple from corrupt practices and restore it as God intended. While these corrupt practices were certainly being rebuked, Jesus goes beyond cleansing to enact a symbolic act of judgement against the leaders of Israel for not only letting this happen but for personally making money from these dishonest practices. As he says, ¹⁷ **And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers. Mark 11: 17.**

Some will argue that Jesus' cleansing of the temple as an excuse to justify the use of violence. They speculate that he must have been so angry at the money changers that he resorted to violence against them. However, to call Jesus' overturning of the tables and seats of the money changers violence is to stretch the use of this word. We have no indication that Jesus has acted in anger but what he has done angers the chief priest and scribes. The cry of the children has alerted the religious leaders that Jesus is now a genuine threat to their status.

¹⁴ **The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. Matthew 21: 14-15.**

David had prohibited the blind and the lame from coming into his house. ⁸ **On that day David had said, "Anyone who conquers the Jebusites will have to use the water shaft to reach those 'lame and blind' who are David's enemies." That is why they say, "The 'blind and lame' will not enter the palace." 2 Samuel 5:8.**

In Leviticus the blind and the lame were prohibited from offering sacrifices to God. ¹⁷ **"Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. Leviticus 21: 17.** Jesus is truly cleansing the temple by overturning the established order by inviting into the temple those who had been excluded. The blind and the lame come into the temple, and he heals them. He brings peace into the temple.

Further the reason that there were doves sold in the temple was that the poor were allowed to substitute doves and pigeons for sheep. Sadly, this provision became another way for some to exploit the poor. ⁷ **"Anyone who cannot afford a lamb is to bring two doves or two young pigeons to the Lord as a penalty for their sin—one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. Leviticus 5:7.**

In Jesus' day the temple had become a nationalistic symbol that served only to separate Israel from the nations. If its was to become what God intended, that is, "a house of prayer for all nations" walls would have to crumble. Indeed, walls will soon crumble, and barriers breached. When Jesus dies, the temple veil is split from top to bottom and a gentile confesses that he is the son of God. ³⁸ **The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Mark 15:38-39.**

The Christian faith is not committed to gaining the most votes, running a popularity contest, of finishing high in the polls. Sometimes we are called to take a hard and honest stand for the truth, even if its not popular. Trying to protect our turf as the Pharisees do here is a sign of spiritual weakness that can kill a ministry or a church's creditability. If we keep our eyes on the demands of culture and seek to obey it, God's truth that usually suffers. Being truthful does not mean being callous or violent but sometimes we do need to make a stand and be clear why we are making a stand.