

Please imagine the courtyard which surrounds the temple buildings. What met Jesus's gaze was pretty much like a market – a busy cacophony. There were all kinds of stalls including a table for the money-changers. What were they for?

First of all Everybody had to pay Temple Tax – to help pay for the upkeep of the Temple. Temple tax had to be paid in Temple shekels – you could not pay it in Greek drachma or Roman denarii which were the currencies in general use.

Secondly the Jewish Law required sacrifices of different kinds for different events – you may recall that Mary and Joseph were required to offer sacrifice when they presented Jesus as a baby in the temple. The Law stated that the sacrifice should be a pair of doves – expensive – or two young pigeons – a more realistic sacrifice for people with little income.

The sacrifice was to be bought from a registered dealer in the courtyard of the Temple. The transaction had to be made – you've guessed - in Temple money.

So there were two reasons for money-changers to be present. Not quite a bureau de change but not that different as they charged extortionately for the privilege of their services!

Jesus's motive for driving all from the temple courts is that they were turning his father's house into a market. The disciples later remembered the words of Psalm 69 'Zeal for your house will consume me'. Are we to take this at face value or is there more to it?

I cannot help but feel that that presence of the market was a distraction – I would imagine that the noise would make it difficult to pray even inside the Temple. I wonder what sorts of things distract us from worship and prayer? How might we deal with distraction? I'll come back to this.

Let's consider the angry Jesus:

I can still remember asking my Sunday school teacher why Jesus was angry. Wasn't anger a sin? From her I learnt the expression 'righteous indignation'. Within the confines of the Law - as it was then - the selling of the sacrificial animals/birds and the changing of money was not wrong. But they were taking advantage of the worshippers, especially the poor, low-income people, to line their own pockets and that was not lawful. Was Jesus's righteous indignation rooted in the absence of justice? Or is this about sacrifice?

The odd thing is that many of the prophets report God's message as not requiring sacrifice. To King Saul the prophet Samuel said 'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.' (1Samuel 15: 22b). The Psalmist (51) said 'but you take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart you will not despise'.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke God's word: 'when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt I gave them no commands about whole-offering or sacrifice. What I did command was 'obey me, and I shall be your God and you will be my people'. (Jeremiah 7: 22-23) And as for the shrines built (in the Valley of ben Hinnom) to sacrifice their sons and daughters Jeremiah reports God saying 'that was no command of mine; indeed it never entered my mind'.(Jeremiah 7: 31)

And then we heard that Jesus 'drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.' John's gospel is drawing attention to the fact that Sacrifice is not necessary!

Not only is it not necessary but it can distract from the relationship with God. Look at what happened to Saul when he set out to attack the Philistines. (1Samuel 13) He was expecting Samuel but Samuel did not come and the troops started to scatter. Saul thinks his failure is due to the fact that Samuel had not arrived so no sacrifice had been made. So Saul disobeyed God and offered the sacrifice himself. He was distracted from his relationship with God by the need to offer the sacrifice, in order to win the battle.

Earlier I suggested that the market in the Temple courtyard was a distraction from worship and asked what distracts us. Like the market in the Temple courtyard a lot of noise when we are trying to be quiet with God, is an obvious distraction. We have to learn and practice giving the noise permission to be there so that it no longer distracts.

It may sound odd but even reading the Bible or praying can be a distraction if we feel it's something we ought to do – as though we are working through a list and want to tick off the things we have done. Do you have a list of things that you think you ought to do as a Christian? Have those things ironically become a distraction from your relationship with God?

My point is that we have to be flexible about when we spend specific time with God and we have to practice the presence of God throughout the day as taught by Brother Lawrence. He was a Seventeenth century lay monk (1614 – 1691) who worked in the monastery kitchen. His Abbot chastised him for being late to chapel. Brother Lawrence replied: God is everywhere, even in the kitchen with the pots and pans. His writing has come down to us in a little book 'The practice of the presence of God'. Practice – whatever we are doing God is with us but we have to practice/ cooperate with the Holy Spirit to open our eyes/ears/awareness. When we practice this awareness there is no danger of thinking that a particular event/tragedy has happened because we failed to go to Church or we did not say our prayers. When we practice the presence of God throughout the day we are more receptive to the movements of the Holy Spirit who fills us with zeal so that our awareness of injustice increases and our sense of righteous indignation is fired up. We may not make a whip of cords to expel the profiteers from the Temple Courtyard but we may find ourselves praying (more often) with greater ardour for particular people or causes. Our prayers are somehow more intense, not necessarily more wordy – in fact probably less wordy as the spirit groans within us.

Using some of Brother Lawrence's words let us pray:

Help us Lord to remember always the connection between you and ourselves. Help us to grow accustomed to: worshipping you, asking for your grace, offering you our hearts throughout the day whether at work or at play. Help us to act in faith with love and humility. Amen.