

Yesterday each time I looked out the window I was met with fox footprints in the snow! It has been such a strange week – on the one hand beautiful and surreal, on another hand a lot of work to keep people warm and to keep the building workable. It turns out salt and grit are as bad as playdough for getting on every surface and moving around the building.

Snow and extreme weather is one of those things which brings out both the best and sadly sometimes the worst in people. I have been so impressed this week that so many have shown to care for friends, neighbours and strangers alike. People watching out for others in the street for example in a way we often don't see anymore. So many people offered to help at the foodbank, and Christ Church even extended its hours for the 6 days to take in those who had nowhere to go.

Having said this I have also been surprised by the number of people I have encountered who thought the world should be no different this week and were impatient that they had to enter a different door, or might need to shake snow off to keep others safe; or that they might need to drive or walk a little slower.

The truth is however that things are not always as they appear. We might assume that a person is impatient with the cold weather only to find that they actually distracted by the fact they are trying to get to an emergency and are fearful of what they might find.

Anyone looking at our car park yesterday may have thought we have a whole pack of foxes by the amount of footprint going in different directions; actually we have had one this week who seems to like to walk in patterns as he looks for food. He is really missing the leftovers from the both schools which have had snow days this week!

When we look at a situation, whether it is footprints; or a person's anger or frustration, or even the sound of laughter in the snow, we use the knowledge that we have, and the assumptions of this knowledge to help us understand what is going on. Often this human skill works well – but often it can mean we miss an important fact – or even the underlying of truth of the situation.

This is very much the case with the story in today's Gospel as we hear that Jesus overturns the tables in the temple – a story which looks Jesus losing it; but it is a story which is so often misquoted and misused.

I have heard this story of Jesus anger in the temple used to explain everything from  
+ justification for anger and violence – because Jesus did it -  
+ to why Jesus isn't the son of God, as his anger means he is not perfect and God's son should be, –  
+ to why we shouldn't have coffee served in church because this is a house of prayer.

All texts, including this passage, speaks to each of us in different ways – but sadly our abuse of this text for our own good as a society often seems to outweigh the original good that was intended. Thankfully however interpretation is not left up to our individual whims – the history and tradition of theological and pastoral insight informs how we interpret and also defines interpretations that are just false! It is important to remember that while God speaks to us in different ways and uses text in different ways – some interpretations are just wrong – especially when such teachings do not fit with the heart of God.

It is the reason that we always look at the context of the story. The first thing to notice when interpreting the temple incident in the Gospel of John is its different location compared to the Synoptic Gospels.

Whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the temple scene follows Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, in John the episode is moved to immediately after Jesus' first sign, the wedding at Cana<sup>1</sup>. In the synoptic gospels this story leads to Jesus' arrest - it functions as the final public act whereby the authorities make the decision to arrest and kill Jesus. But this is not the case in the Gospel of John, here it takes place at the beginning of Jesus ministry.

In John's account (and actually I think in the other accounts as well) Jesus is not challenging the selling of goods – he understands that the selling of goods is part of the temple structure, and part of the pilgrimage, you need, for example to purchase doves which would be used as part of the sacrifice as required under law. What Jesus is challenging is the need for this sacrifice, the need for the temple, he is beginning to outline a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. Jesus actions in this account are about a much larger theological question which is the location of God – Jesus is teaching that God is bigger and more omnipresence than the temple.

Within this context the temple symbolizes the location and presence of God, but Jesus is essentially saying to the temple leaders that he is the presence of God. Where one looks for God, expects to find God, imagines God to be - are all at stake in these story. When you look at the purpose of the whole of the *Gospel of John*, it is that *Jesus is the revelation of God, the one and only God (John 1:18), will be repeatedly reinforced with different sets of images, different characters, different directives, all pointing back to this essential truth.*<sup>2</sup>

Now this concept of a revealed and relational God is not new, what is new is Jesus. The presence of God, once embodied in God's word is now embodied in this person standing before the Priests and people of Jerusalem. God is in the world and wanting a direct relationship with creation!

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<sup>111</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377)

To help us understand this we also read today the third covenant from God in Exodus. It is important to note that Exodus 20 does not start with a command, it starts with a revelation of relationship. “*God spoke all these words*”

God’s own introduction to these words is important for an appropriate understanding: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The Ten Commandments are not a law code, a body of laws that are meant to float free of their narrative context. This introductory line about redemption -- often omitted from printed versions of the Ten Commandments, unfortunately -- is recognized in Judaism as the first word; “you shall have no other gods before me” is the second word.<sup>3</sup>

This opening word of God accomplishes several things. It keeps the commandments personally oriented: I am the Lord *your* God. Obedience to the commandments is relationally conceived. These are words given to *you* by *your* God. The law is a *gift* of a God who has redeemed *you*.

The Ten Commandments are an integral part of the covenant between God and people at Mount Sinai. This covenant is a specific covenant *within* the already existing covenant with Abraham (which we heard last week) – it is a code not a new promise.

As we have reflected over the past few weeks, these covenants, and promises of God were at the heart of the relationship which develops with God, but even more importantly as we turn to today’s gospel is the fact that Jesus is moving this on to a new understanding and a new promise – in which Jesus is at the heart of our relationship with God. It is not a new and way out suggestion – rather it builds on the personal relationship, God has had with God’s people over many centuries.

And this relationship, which John’s gospel in particular tries to unpack is still at the heart of our faith today.

In the Hebrew covenants, and even in Jesus’ outburst in the temple forecourts, God is saying that a relationship with us is desired. God wants us, loves us, approaches us and longs to be in relationship with us.

It is one of the reasons that we share in the Eucharist each week together. In Holy Communion, Jesus is telling us that he wants our company, wants a relationship, that we are always welcome guests at God’s table.<sup>4</sup>

Which brings us back to Jesus in the temple forecourts. We do not share in the Eucharist because we are in the temple, we share in the Eucharist because we want

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2368](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2368) quoting For more on the numbering of the Ten Commandments in various traditions, see Rolf Jacobson’s 2014 commentary on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17.

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams ‘Being Christian’ p41

to share in God's kingdom and when we share together we are the church that Jesus desired us to be. Jesus' passionate cry in the temple in John's Gospel is yet another announcement of this relationship with a real, living and personal gift from God to humanity - God wants us to be open to living as the kingdom of God now!

As we continue our Lenten journey this week, we are invited to remember this message. We are always in the midst of God, always invited and always welcome. Whatever the situations we view or encounter; God invites us to live intentionally as people of faith. It is a way of seeing and believing that invites us to be not only aware of those around us, but of ourselves and what God is saying to us. It is a invitation to have the courage to place all our hope in God, and to live as if we believe this. Amen.