

A Reading and Reflection for Monday in Holy Week

Matthew 21.12-13

'Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'

Reflection

The writer of the children's hymn that speaks of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" was clearly not thinking of Jesus as shown here. Jesus' words and actions in the temple in Jerusalem express a profound and passionate anger and sorrow, at the way in which the purpose for which that temple in Jerusalem was built has been betrayed and distorted by exploitative profiteers. The outer court of the Temple was known as the "Court of the Gentiles"; a place where people from all nations were welcome to gather to offer their prayers. But it has been taken over by traders and merchants. The temple is no longer what it was intended to be, a place of prayer for all people.

The connection between place and prayer is an intricate and complex one. It is founded on a paradox of which King Solomon was aware when he dedicated the temple some nine hundred years earlier. How was it possible for the God who created all things, whose presence fills the universe, to be seen as located in one building, however grand, however sacred? And yet somehow, by God's grace, this holy place was to be the focal point of God's dwelling with his people. Ancient maps depicted Jerusalem as the centre of the universe, because it was here, in the temple, that God's presence would be found more truly than anywhere else. This was the house of prayer.

The association between place and prayer is one that is found across all faiths and religions. It seems to be a common thread in human cultures to identify certain places, whether natural features of the landscape or parts of the built environment, as holy places, shrines where prayer and worship have their most fitting place.

Those sacred places of prayer matter and are to be valued. Hence it hurts when, for whatever reason, prayer can no longer be offered in that place. It will be strange this week, and for many people deeply upsetting, no longer to be able to gather in our churches as we recall the events of Holy Week, and no longer to be able to kneel at the altar rail and take Holy Communion on Easter Day. Most clergy were saddened, and a few quite angered, by the Archbishops' instruction that even solitary prayer was not to be offered in our church buildings during the current crisis, but that we all, lay and ordained alike, were to stay at home and pray at home.

It is all right to acknowledge the hurt and loss that is felt at not being free to worship in these cherished places of prayer. But we should hold this pain in the wider perspective of a bigger picture. It is a temporary measure. This crisis will pass and we will return to the houses of prayer. I often get the sense, especially in our historic buildings at Baxterley, Kingsbury and Merevale, that the prayers offered in those places over the centuries have seeped into the very

stones of the church walls; and it will take more than a few weeks or months lying fallow for that to change. Our churches will remain prayerful and prayer-filled places.

More importantly, however much prayer and God's presence might be associated with a particular place, it is never confined to that place. King Solomon's instinct was right. The God who fills the heavens and the earth is not held confined in a building made by human hands. Wherever we lift holy hands in prayer, God is there, and God is with us.

As Holy Week moves on, we will recall the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate and the rigged hearing before the Caiaphas the High Priest. At that hearing, a witness is brought forward to claim that Jesus threatened to tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus' words have been twisted by his foes in their efforts to incriminate him. But hidden in all that is the deeper truth, that Jesus, who died and after three days was raised to life again, is the one in whom God's presence is most truly and most fully to be found. Prayer is not limited to a sacred building or place; in Christ we always have access to God, wherever we may be. May each of us, over these days and beyond, discover that our own home is also a house of prayer.