[**7 March 2021**](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/lent-3)

**Call to worship**

We have come into this place to worship God.
Holy God, as we meet together today,
we ask that you renew our love for you.
Open our eyes to see fresh things,
open our ears to hear with more clarity,
open our minds to recognise new ideas –
that we may be willing to grow and change
and to become more like your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

O Lord, clear our hearts and minds of all unrighteous clutter.
As we seek to be your Church in our day,
drive out all that is unworthy of you.
Let us think not of human transactions – our losses and gains –
for we gather under the banner of your love
that demands no price but our love in return.
Help us to sacrifice all that we are to your service,
as Jesus sacrificed everything for us.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord God, our ancestors turned the Temple into a marketplace; where are the marketplaces in our lives, O Lord?

We confess that we are driven by the need to possess. In our greed, we plunder the earth of resources and fail to share the good things you have provided for our needs. We are obsessed with the work of human hands, making idols of our houses – and yours.

Forgive us, and help us to see that your Church is eternally under construction – in us.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

It’s hard, O Lord, when the message hits home;
when we see, in the sins of our forebears, our own;
when getting real has toppled our self-styled crowns
and the weight of guilt drags us down.
But you, dear Lord, always forgive,
when in the Holy Spirit we choose to live.
And so, we lift our heads bare and humbled,
casting aside thinking that was dark and jumbled.
In your forgiveness we find the light
to walk again in the path that is right.
**Amen.**

**John 2.13-22**

Jesus’ presence always brings challenge and change to lives. In our passage today (John 2.13-22) he is the disrupter, he challenges the status quo, he literally overturns the tables and drives out the money changers of the temple.

We all know this pandemic has changed how we live. It has disrupted our lives. I wonder what place have you missed most over lockdown?[[1]](#endnote-1) School? College? Your favourite coffee shop? Friends’ houses? Church? Connecting over a screen is all very well, and we’re lucky to have that option (imagine lockdown 20 years ago!) – but it can’t quite take the place of the real face-to-face 'there-ness' of other people, or the reassuring solidity of the places we love.

As pupils across the country head back into their school buildings this week, and some other places – including churches – prepare to open up, it’s worth reminding ourselves about the role of places; and what God designed the church, and us, to be.

What God definitely didn’t have in mind was what we read about in John 2.13-22: people going through the motions of worship, not to connect with God, but to impress other people, and traders exploiting the situation to make some quick money.

There was a tax that every Jew over the age of 19 had to pay. That was the Temple Tax. It was necessary so that the Temple sacrifices and the Temple ritual could be carried out day by day. The tax amounted to almost two days wages for the average working person. The Temple tax had to be paid in Jewish coins as the Roman coins and other currencies were seen as unclean and even blasphemous. The Roman coins had inscriptions on them declaring Caesar to be the Son of God and Lord. Titles of course that the first Christians appropriated for Jesus as the true Son of God and Lord.

Pilgrims arrived from all over the world into Jerusalem. It was estimated that over two million people would gather in Jerusalem at Passover time. That’s a lot of money to change and a lot of money to be made. The moneychangers took their cut, and the religious rulers took their cut. So instead of the Tax being two days wages it ended up being three days wages. What enraged Jesus was that pilgrims to the Passover could ill afford it, were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money changers. it was a rampant and shameless social injustice – and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion. Likewise, the purchase of animals for sacrifice was also a racket. Hence Jesus anger: turning over the tables of the moneychangers and driving out the sheep and cattle.

Richard Reddie writes[[2]](#endnote-2), ‘Traditionally, a ‘good’ Budget (one that garners favourable news headlines) sees the Chancellor of the Exchequer ‘giving away’ things. This invariably means reducing, and in some instances, abolishing certain taxes and duties on items that we all use. However, a famous Russian saying suggests that the ‘only place you find free cheese is in a mouse trap’! And often, it is only after the economists and financial experts have scrutinized the Chancellor’s handiwork, that the ‘fine print’ reveals that certain other taxes were raised or imposed. This should be expected as there is no such thing as a ‘free lunch’ – everything has a cost or price.’

Jesus’ activities in the Temple appear at the start of his earthly ministry in John’s Gospel, but occur near the end of his life, in the others. They foreshadow his eternal sacrifice – him paying the cost for taking away our sins and also abolishing the sacrificial system, because he will be the percet sacrifice that reassures us of the forgiveness and acceptance of God. While salvation is free for us; there was a price to pay for our Lord. Moreover, Jesus also reminds us that if we are sincere about following him, there is a price we also have to pay; we must take up our cross daily. A saying that I reflected on last week. What does this mean for us in our current situation? And how does this square with our ‘something for nothing’ culture?

The church has always had an uneasy relationship with money. Jesus said you either worship God or money ( Matthew 6.24). A high proportion of his teaching was about the hold money has over our lives more than God does. But everyone needs money to exist. The church can’t run without it. We depend on the generosity of people to give freely for our work. The Bible encourages us to regard everything we have as a gift from God, not to be possessive about our money but to see it as a blessing from God in order to bless us and also others and God’s work. There is a spiritual principle in scripture (defined in Paul’s Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 9) that those who give will receive back many blessings and live with an open gracious heart to all.

Thank God we don’t have a turnstile at the entrance of the church that says you can only come in if you pay for your ticket – like the theatre, cinema of a sports event. Thank God we don’t impose membership fees like the golf club. At one level the principle is it shouldn’t cost you to come to church. But at another level if you follow Christ it costs everything – because it cost Him everything. But like the pandemic and the budget and paying for our country, running a church does cost money - and how much people give determines how much we can do.

Jesus stood against exploitation. It can be argued that Jesus was an arch-disrupter – he shook up the status quo of his day in so many ways. After he turned over the tables of those selling animals and exchanging money in the Temple, it was no longer business as usual for them. Everything had changed.

In ‘[The Market as God](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/03/the-market-as-god/306397/)’, a prophetic article written over 20 years ago, Harvey Cox saw an insurmountable difference between all traditional religions, which teach that there are limits to any human enterprise, and the religion of ‘The Market’, whose first commandment is ‘There is never enough’. More recently the CEOs of the USA’s leading companies acknowledged that reducing everything and everyone to what profit they can produce for shareholders has to be tempered by such things as fostering ‘diversity and inclusion’, ‘dealing fairly and ethically with suppliers’, ‘supporting the communities in which we work’, and ‘protecting the environment’. How sincere they are is an open question, and Jesus’ challenge remains: ‘Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ Stop commodifying everything: people, God!

Although British workers are being encouraged to return to the office, there is little doubt that this will not be business as usual. For some, the ‘lockdown look’ means they will not be able to fit into their work clothes. Notwithstanding that, offices will need to be adapted to meet social distancing requirements, and some staff will still be required to work from home due to space issues.

Aside from work, our overall new normal will be, in the immortal words of Star Trek’s Science Officer Spock (to Captain Kirk), ‘Life Jim, but not as we know it!’ Much has been said about our ‘BC’ – Before Covid – being replaced by something unfamiliar that is prone to change. Jesus’ actions in the Temple forced the traders to confront their way of life, thus presenting them with another way of living – a better one. How is Jesus speaking to us at this time? What is his better way for us?

In the Gospels, we can see that the Jewish leaders feared Jesus; they feared not only his message but also his influence or hold over the people. After he turned over the tables and ran out the money men, they asked him by what authority was he doing this. Indeed, later in John 11:48 the self-same people pointed out that: ‘If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our Temple and nation.’ After the attack on their wealth and power these leaders plotted to kill him.

Change, or what we consider to be the wrong type of change, always engenders nervousness and fear. The obvious question in Jesus’ time was, should the people have feared about the ‘Romans’ if the ‘Messiah’ was in their presence? Equally, what views, ideas and behaviours is Jesus, the disrupter, asking us to change in our lives? Moreover, are we fearful of making those changes?

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, the people often responded to his message as if it appeared out of nowhere, rather than being firmly grounded in the very same Scriptures to which they supposedly adhered. It would be easy to suggest that a combination of interpretation, ‘spiritual myopia’ and jealously led to this confusion. However, it should also be noted that Jesus’ teachings had a unique way of turning people’s idea of who God was on its head, leading to confusion, embarrassment, anger and guilt. In short, they could not handle the truth about God, which Jesus presented.

The Temple authorities and the traders were making the Temple court into an uproar and a market place where no one could pray. The noise of animals, the rattle of coins, the voices raised in bargaining and dispute all combined to make it a place where you couldn’t worship – where the presence of God was shut out.

Sometimes there is stuff in our church life – disputes, exclusiveness, lack of welcome, arrogance, legalism, - which keeps out the stranger and the seeker after God. It is a sharp reminder of the anger of Jesus to anyone who would prevent people getting closer to God.

Often, in this passage, it’s Jesus’s action that gets all the press but, actually, it’s in Jesus’s words, that the real challenge lies., John’s Gospel was understood to have been written about 50 years after Jesus died and rose again and some twenty years after the actual temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD. The first Christians with the gift of hindsight understood that Jesus’ actions fulfilled the prophecy that on ‘the day of the Lord’ there would no longer be traders in the Temple (Zechariah 14.21), and realized the hope of the psalmist, whose ‘zeal for your house’ longed for the rebuilding of the Temple and the renewal of the people (Psalm 69.9,35-36). And the disciples came to understand that Jesus’ words announced the sign of his death and resurrection. After the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, a mere 90 years after Herod started its reconstruction, Jesus’ followers fully understood that God is worshipped in spirit and truth (4.21-24).

When Jesus talks about rebuilding the Temple in three days, he’s talking about himself. Jesus is the Temple – the living presence of God, not in bricks and mortar but in flesh and blood. And today, through God’s Spirit living in us, so are we.

Looking back over the past year, think about how we have ‘done’ church and been church to others? What is it that we have needed in order to live out your faith? How important are the physical buildings to us? As we return to school or college, and one day to church, in what ways will we be a ‘living temple’ – the living presence of God – in those places?

Marie Kondo describes a mysterious voice, ‘like some god of tidying’, telling her to keep only things that gave her joy. Her 2019 Netflix series, *Tidying up with Marie Kondo*, encouraged gratitude for things we have enjoyed, and empathized with our reluctance to let them go once our lives have moved on. Later that year she launched her own online shop, offering ‘a collection of items that spark joy for Marie and enhance your everyday routine’. But getting rid of old possessions to make room for new acquisitions seems unlikely to bring us true and lasting joy. For Jesus’ followers, the grief of losing the Temple, one of the largest and most beautiful sanctuaries in antiquity, was integral to their joy in finding one another as ‘the body of Christ’.

The educationalist Ken Robinson describes a little girl drawing. Asked, ‘What are you drawing?’, she replies, ‘A picture of God.’ Told, ‘But nobody knows what God looks like,’ she responds, ‘They will in a minute.’ That demonstrates a child’s confidence in her creativity, but also reminds us that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. God in us the hope of glory.

May you know the Lord with you and may others see the Lord in you.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord of the universe,
we pray for our world broken by persecution, warfare and strife.
We commend to you the Uighur people in China,
the people of Myanmar, the people of Yemen.

You desire harmony within and between nations;
you yearn for everyone to know security and safety.

Lord of the world and the church:
**bring healing and peace.**

 Lord of the poor and the rich,
we pray for those who live and labour in developing countries
paid less than the amount they need to survive.
We commend to your tender love those who are exploited,
children who are paid pennies, those who work in sweatshops.

You desire justice for all people;
you yearn for all people to be treated fairly and equitably.

Lord of the world and the church:
**bring healing and peace.**

 Lord of the doctor and the patient,
we pray for our world at this time of pandemic.
We commend to you those who are suffering as a result of Covid-19;
those who are working to combat the Brazilian mutation;
those who are frightened and stressed out.

You desire wholeness and health for all people;
you yearn for an end to the pandemic.

Lord of the world and the church:
**bring healing and peace.**

 Lord of the chapel and the cathedral,
we pray for all places of worship throughout the world.
We commend to you caretakers and cleaners, treasurers and guides.

You desire holiness in your children
and in the places in which they worship.

Lord of the world and the church:
**bring healing and peace.**

 Lord of all in need,
we bring to you the prayers of our hearts.
We commend to you those about whom we are especially concerned,
praying for…

You desire that your children care for one another.

Lord of the world and the church:
**bring healing and peace.**

In Jesus’ name we pray.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Father God, we adore you for your patience with your wayward children; for bearing with us when our understanding is skewed and our behaviour wrong.
Jesus, we adore you for being with us always, your humanity entwined with ours; for showing us the way in your life and through the Word.
Holy Spirit, we adore you for working through us despite our failings; for living in us and enabling us with a strength greater than our own.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are wisdom in our world; you flow through creation and consciousness.
Our attempts to house you in bricks and mortar are foolish. Come to us as now in bread and wine. Break into our hearts and drive out all that is not honouring to you.

As we eat and drink together remake us into your temple, holy and pleasing in your sight, a light to the nations.

Dying, you destroyed our death.

Rising, you restored our life.

Lord Jesus, come in glory.

Come, Creator God: renew the face of the earth;

come, eternal Saviour: remake us in your likeness;

come, Holy Spirit, transform these gifts:

that Christ may be known to us in the breaking of the bread

and that we may be strengthened to serve him in the world.

May we on earth be one with all Christ’s people,

and, when all things are complete,

be raised up to be with him,

[with .all *the saints; those who have died]*

and with all your faithful servants in the heavenly places,

the homeland which we seek by faith,

and where he reigns in glory,

with you, Father, and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever.

Amen.

The peace of the Lord be with you.

Peace be with you.

The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed

took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said:

‘This is my body which is broken for you.

Do this is remembrance of me.’

In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying:

‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,

you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.]

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us.

Therefore let us keep the feast. I Corinthians 5:7

The bread which we break is the communion of the

body of Christ.

The cup of blessing which we bless is the communion

of the blood of Christ.

Jesus, Lamb of God:

have mercy on us.

Jesus, bearer of our sins:

have mercy on us.

Jesus, redeemer of the world:

grant us peace.

Holy things for a holy people.

Only one is holy, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are made holy in him.

Take, eat; this is the body of Christ, broken for you.

Do this in remembrance of him.

This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ,

shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sin.

Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of him.

**After communion**

Let us praise the Lord.

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Blessing and honour

and glory and power

be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.

**Prayer after Communion**

Let us pray.

Most gracious God,

we praise you for what you have given

and for what you have promised us here.

You have made us one

with all your people in heaven and on earth.

You have fed us with the bread of life,

and renewed us for your service.

Now we give ourselves to you;

and we ask that our daily living

may be part of the life of your kingdom,

and that our love may be your love

reaching out into the life of the world;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Dismissal and Blessing**

Go in peace to serve the Lord;

and the blessing of God Almighty,

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

be with you always. Amen
Amen.

1. *Lucy Carman* https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/lent-3/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Richard Reddie is the Director of Justice and Inclusion for*[*Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*](http://www.ctbi.org.uk/)*. He worships at St James Church, West Streatham in London.* *https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/lent-3/the-week-in-focus* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)