

Sunday 20 March (Matthew 21:12-14)

One of the first things Jesus and his disciples would have seen as they entered Jerusalem was the huge temple. It looked very grand, but Jesus knew that actually it was not what it seemed.

What upset him was the fact that the leaders had forgotten that the temple was God's special place to meet with his people. They had forgotten that everything done there had to be done as God wanted it. Yet the people who came to worship were often being cheated.

Long before this in his Law, God had warned his people that they were not to bring him sacrifices which weren't perfect. (In fact, the word 'sacrifices' suggests bringing something one likes very much or which is very precious but which one is 'offering' up or giving away.) Even today, we would say "If you want to become a famous actor or musician or sportsman, then you will have to sacrifice your time and practice for hours." Because it is so special to be part of God's family, we can't just give God the leftovers or the things we were going to throw out anyway – that wouldn't be a sacrifice. If we love him we want to give him our best.

In Jesus' day it had become the custom for the priests to examine the gift the people were bringing to see if it was perfect so that they people wouldn't annoy God. The leaders had forgotten that God had also said that he looked more at the heart than the gift. But then they made things worse. They began to use the process to make money. Instead of helping the people come to God, they made it harder for them. .

Many of these poor people had travelled for a long way to come to the temple to bring their offering to God – just as he had told them to do. But when the priest found a problem with their sacrifice, the poor folk were stuck without an offering!

They would be told to go to one of the stalls or tables which were set up in the courtyard to buy a better sacrifice! The prices at those stalls were often very high – so once again the temple wasn't looking after the poor. But then when the folk got to those tables and offered their money, they were reminded to use the special temple money. So they would have to go to the moneychangers to swop their coins – and the moneychangers weren't all very honest either, it seems. They didn't give a great rate of exchange. So the people were cheated again and again, while all they wanted to do was to obey God.

Jesus was furious. How dare the leaders pretend their actions were godly? Actually they were turning "the house of prayer" into "a den of thieves"! He couldn't allow this.

So he made himself a whip of ropes or vines twisted together and went round furiously, overturning the money-changers tables and chasing the people and the sheep and cattle and birds out. It must have been chaos! The ordinary people cheered him on – they were thrilled that someone was standing up for them, and they thought this was a sign that Jesus was going to be an earthly ruler. But of course the priests and merchants were furious and made even more plans to arrest him. Judas seems to have offered to help them now.

Jesus expects us to be honest and true to his commands, not tricky and mean. This is as true for us as it was then.