

Temple

A Temple is the place where one prays, a great building in which *humans* try to express the greatness of the One they worship. Or perhaps it can be a personal place, perhaps even a spiritual “place” which needs no physical location - a place within me, which I can enter on a bus or in a waiting-room. Or it is my whole praying self, which becomes a Temple when I turn to the God who comes into my life. Or it is a place *appointed by God*, where He has chosen to be close to me - or to us.

Jesus in Jerusalem

Jesus has much to do with Jerusalem. We find his various visits there described: Luke alone gives us two early visits: the first, for his ritual *redemption*. When God *passed over* the Jewish firstborn in Egypt, they became sacred to him, most perfectly *his people*; consequently, every first-born Jew has to be ritually *bought back* from God by a special sacrifice in Jerusalem. This lies behind Paul’s thought about redemption; God has freed us from slavery to evil, so we become slaves to God. At its simplest, *You have been bought and paid for*. Jesus is taken up to the Temple so that his parents can take his two pigeons to be sacrificed for him. Again it is Luke who gives us *the Finding of Jesus in the Temple* when, at twelve years old, he sets off prematurely *on his Father’s business*. Apart from these stories, we find that the first three Gospels bring him to Jerusalem only once, on the journey which ends in his death. His arrival there is the occasion for his famous *cleansing of the Temple*, where he arrives like a whirlwind, disrupting the buying, selling and changing of money with the authority of divine power flaring in his eyes: the prophet Malachi said that the Lord himself would *suddenly enter his Temple* - to purify its priests, and to perfect its sacrifices. Jesus is stepping into some pretty mighty shoes when he does this powerful deed. No wonder the priests ask him for his authority!

“This Man Said....”

At his trial Jesus is accused of having said: *Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up*. This was blasphemous language to his hearers, for whom the Temple was the last vestige of the Holy Land left to them. The high priests were desperately trying to preserve the sanctity and independence of the nation’s religion, in the teeth of facts of life like the total dominance of the Romans; and the Temple was the most sacred

relic they had of the days of David and Solomon. Now here was this upstart rabbi from heaven knows what obscure village in Galilee, practically taking the place over by force, and swanning in on a royal mount, with his talk of David, and the Kingdom of God, with the population waving palm branches and singing national anthems; *it is necessary for this man to die*, says Caiaphas, *so that the people can be saved*.

The Temple Veil

In a real sense Jesus *did* take over the Temple at that moment of entry. From the moment he takes possession of it, he himself becomes the celebrant of its liturgy. At the moment of Jesus’ death, God desecrates his own Temple, tearing its veil from top to bottom. The Gospel is saying that the true Temple “appointed by God” is no longer the great building on Mount Sion, but the body of his Son raised up on the Cross. He is the Temple “raised up in three days”, and our place in him, rather than any earthly monument, makes us able to worship God in spirit and truth.

Shaking the Foundations

It is clear that God the Father is as capable of *upsetting the Temple* as Jesus is. The present state of the Christian Church is far from peaceful; the present state of most people’s soul also seems to me to be in crisis. Our world is shaken with revolutionary forces, *wars and rumours of wars*. The apocalyptic description in today’s Gospel seems extraordinarily exact. We should not be tempted to analyse what is happening, or to “prepare our defence”; we are promised that if we hold our peace, the Holy Spirit will speak in us with divine eloquence. This is a tremendous promise, and the invitation I read in it is to the kind of prayer that refuses judgments and human anxieties, waiting for the voice of God to speak, when human wisdom has failed and is silent. This is a silence the Church keeps on Holy Saturday, when even the altars are fasting. It is awaiting the Easter dawn. *Fr Philip*