

My Body is a Temple – Lent 3, Year B

My body is a temple!

Well, maybe it could do with a bit of TLC, but it is essential to my holistic wellbeing.

The truth is, over the last 50 years or so, we have learned how to take much better care of our bodies in a physical sense. We have learned what is good for us to eat and drink and how to keep our bodies fit through exercise. But I wonder how often we include spiritual wellbeing in our wider considerations about our health?

I was once told the story of an Abbott of a Benedictine Community who one Sunday, with the dinner table full of guests, prayed over the roast chicken in front of him; 'Thank you Sister Chicken for giving all that you are so that we may continue to be all that we can be. God bless this meal for us!'

This alluring Abbot had brought intentionality to the table. He had forced himself and all those present to recognise the chicken, not just as a piece of meat to be devoured, but as a precious part of God's creation that deserved respect and honour. Not least because it was now dead so that they could be fed and nourished. The Abbott had turned an average Sunday meal into a holy meal! This meal would now feed their bodies and their souls.

Today, we had the story of the cleansing of the temple. Now, this is a story that can conjure up quite a bit of controversy. Sometimes the odd individual uses it to argue that our churches should not be used for anything other than worship: for instance, that fetes and sales and toddler groups and cafes should not take place inside our church buildings. Well, I guess, we could stop them all and see how long our

churches could survive then! But most importantly, to take this approach is to entirely misunderstand this passage and what is going on within it. This entire section has Jesus calling us to pay attention to what is going on below the surface. You see, when Jesus enters the temple, he doesn't just find a craft sale or a café raising a few quid for the church roof or to feed the vicar and his family, he finds a whole marketplace of people profiteering for their own gain – loaning money at extortionate interest and selling animals for sacrifice at inflated prices – it is a hive of dubious commercial activity and the people present are worshipping their money not God. It's bad enough if they do that out in the world, but in the Temple – the very building dedicated as God's house! Jesus makes a scene and drives them out. If they had been conducting themselves appropriately with the right intentions and raising money for the disadvantaged poor or for the work of the Temple, then Jesus would likely have had no problem.

After clearing the temple, and at the provocation of those gathered around him, Jesus then utters those famous words which would eventually be used against him at his fateful trial; “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days.”

As the Gospel writer later reveals for us his readers, Jesus wasn't speaking of the Temple building out from which he had just driven the moneychangers, he was talking about his body. As such, his words sound like a controversial challenge, but are actually a foretelling of what is to come.

Those gathered around clearly misunderstand him, his disciples included. This all happens really early on in John's Gospel and what they are seeing and hearing must come as a shock to his disciples who are only just getting used to Jesus' teaching style.

Way back at around 350 BC, Aristotle rather convincingly argued that the body and soul were interdependent – that one could not exist without the other. Certainly, one can sometimes see the resulting damage to the body when someone hasn't paid due attention to their soul, and visa versa. This understanding of the body and soul being intimately linked seems to underpin much of the Gospels' philosophy, and certainly this passage. Jesus is intentionally relating his body as the place in and through which his soul, which is inseparably attached to God, resides.

Jesus is also clearly aware that those around him are struggling to understand, so why doesn't he just explain himself? Well, this won't be the last time that people misunderstand what Jesus is saying or take offense by it and neither will it be the last time he refuses to explain himself. Jesus often leaves these things open. It is as if he is taking Job's words to heart – 'My ways are not your ways, says the Lord'; or in simpler language, 'I'm mysterious folks, deal with it!'

Mystery can be uncomfortable to sit with. We always want answers, to bring things down to our own comfortable level and explain things away. But there is always a mysteriousness to God that refuses to let us put him into a box of our own making. Sitting with a mystery and allowing it to enfold us can add inexpressible richness to our outlook and endeavours. It can certainly make us more receptive and open to the things that are beyond our understanding. In time, it can reveal to us untold truths.

That is exactly what we hear happening in today's Gospel passage. As the narrator informs us; it takes for the unfolding of events, and Christ's torturous death and resurrection, for Christ's disciples to realise what Jesus has been speaking of in this interaction at the Temple. That when he tells those gathered that if they destroy the Temple, he will rebuild it

in 3 days, he is not speaking of the Temple building, but of his own body in which God resides. With his death and resurrection, they discover that he is not bound by earthly constraints; the power of God within him will rebuild his body in a way far superior; a body that neither pain nor decay can damage; a body beyond the ability of human sin and disfigurement to destroy.

I have a friend who is a Franciscan Friar. He's a very holy man. As with all Franciscans, he is identifiable by his brown habit – that is unless he's chilling in his DMs and Jeans. He follows a strict diet as a part of his discipline. He will not drink tea or coffee and avoids unnatural additives wherever possible. He also tries to only eat organic food that is sustainably sourced. When challenged over his lifestyle choices, he will say; 'Our Lord teaches us that our bodies are temples. We should look after both!'

What this Friar does is rather ingenious. He uses his manner of living as an opportunity to deepen his spirituality and relationship with God. He recognises that, just as your awareness of God's proximity can be enhanced in a well cared for church, so too you can feel very close to him through the way you live.

Through what he eats, drinks and the way he prays and exercises our friendly friar deepens his awareness of God present at the centre of his being. Through his intentionality, he makes holy the things many of us dismiss as mundane. Every time he eats, he is able to say to himself; "this food is holy because I have chosen it respectfully to honour God and the temple that is my body". As a Franciscan, he has already given his wealth to God to aid the disadvantaged poor and build up the community of God's church. On top of that, his approach enables him, every time he drinks, exercises, reads, studies, prays, to think of them

as dedicated to God too. These things have become holy, because they are set aside for God through the consciousness underpinning the choices he makes.

When we ponder the alluring Abbott thanking Sister Chicken and this friendly Friar making conscious choices about his lifestyle, we come to realise that they do so specifically to be more intentional about recognising God's proximity with them. I can't help feeling that we can all learn a little from these holy men, I know I certainly can.

What if we were to think in this way about aspects of our lives – consciously making the best choices we can in order that each choice may honour God? What if we consciously tried to use our money, food, drink, free time as a way to serve God? How might our lives be transformed by such holiness? How might it transform the world around us?

In a way, this is what Lent calls us to. Forty days of particular focus on what we eat, drink, how we use our money and our free time to aid our deepening relationship with God, whose healing resonances we can hear echo from the depths of our beings, if we intentionally focus and listen.

Amen.