

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2021

(Psalm 69; John 2:13-22)

His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”¹

This morning’s passage from John is very familiar ... one of the few events from Jesus’ life we find in all four Gospels. Unlike the versions in Matthew, Mark and Luke, in which the cleansing of the temple occurs in the last days leading up to the crucifixion, what we find here takes place at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. At the start of chapter two, we read of the miracle performed at the wedding feast in Cana; now, just a few verses later, we are standing in the outer court of the temple witnessing an incredible moment.

As we see throughout this gospel Jesus visits the temple several times in his life, and for him it is always “a place of conflict.”² We have of course the incident from this morning’s passage. In chapter five we find Jesus being persecuted there as a result of the confession of a man who had just been healed that he had performed the miracle. At other points in chapters seven, eight and 10, conflict arises as Jesus teaches in a way that is opposed to ... *a way that calls out* ... the religious authorities of his time. The temple is a recurring place ... a recurring theme ... in the narrative of Jesus’ ministry as found in this gospel.

The time of the event from this morning’s reading also serves an important purpose for the author of John. Johannine scholar Craig Keener considers the celebration of Passover as the frame for the life of Jesus, with that holiest of weeks marking both the beginning of his ministry and the end of his pre-resurrection life.³ The placement of this particular incident early in the gospel achieves an important theological objective: it places the remainder of Jesus’ work in the shadow of the cross, the “Passion Narrative coincid[ing] with the whole of his public ministry from this episode.”⁴

In this chapter there are obvious indicators of the connection between these moments and the later crucifixion and death. At the wedding feast, for example, Jesus refers to his “hour” not yet arriving. Here, we watch as he explains to those questioning him that he and not the physical structure in which they are standing is the true temple to which he is referring. But we also find another connection, one in the words recalled by the disciples standing there on that day.

“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

These are words from the Psalms, the prayer book which occurs through speech and recollection many times throughout the gospels – and these in particular are a remembrance of Psalm 69:9 “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me.”⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer classified Psalm 69 as one of more than 25 “imprecatory psalms” ... psalms

¹ John 2:17 (NRSV).

² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Vol. One*, p. 519.

³ Keener, p. 518.

⁴ Keener, p. 519.

⁵ Psalm 69:9 (NRSV).

referring to the enemies of God.⁶ Perhaps they are the “prayer of a righteous sufferer who seeks to mobilize God to the rescue.”⁷

It is a psalm linked with an important moment at the crucifixion, one which may come to mind as you listen to these words: “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”⁸ In the words recalled by the disciples in the temple, the cry perhaps of an intensely devoted priest;⁹ at the crucifixion, a recollection of that psalm in the actions of a guard giving Jesus a sponge of sour wine to quench his thirst.

Psalms are so much more than the prayer book or songbook of the Bible. For me, the Psalms are one of the key foundational aspects of the scriptures. They are the threads woven through the tapestry of the Old and New Testaments. They are the source of inspiration and comfort drawn on by the Biblical figures with whom we are familiar. They are the reminders of what has passed, and they are the signposts for what is to come. This morning, even in the slightest of ways, we see how the Psalms were the first recorded thing to flash into the minds of the disciples – not just one disciple, but His *disciples* – as they watched all that Jesus was saying and doing.

I firmly believe they can be those same reminders and signposts ... those sources of inspiration and comfort ... for each one of you. Even today, as we begin the third week of Lent, I know many are still seeking a discipline to help carry them through this season. Allow me to recommend praying with and reflecting on the Psalms. Read them and soak in the emotions of the writers; feel their lament; shed tears with them; cry out the questions with them; share in their exultation and joy. The Psalms have been a go-to for centuries; let them be one of the wells from which you draw, here and now.

Allow me to close with Bonhoeffer’s words in his book on the Psalms ... a wonderful reminder that our prayer is rooted in what God asks of us:

“We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God’s Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray.”¹⁰

Amen.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, p 56 (Kindle edition).

⁷ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms*, p. 303.

⁸ Psalm 69:21 (NRSV).

⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, p. 303.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, p. 14.