

BIBLE READINGS: Exodus 20:1-17 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 John 2:13-22

## SERMON

Here is a test. See if you can tell me what the following items have in common: the Flame Robin, Southern Corroboree Frog, Warty Zieria and *Macrotis lagotis* (Bilby).

Give up? Well, these are all listed on the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment website as threatened and endangered species. An "endangered" species is one that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A "threatened" species is one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

There are many reasons why a species may become endangered, but the number one reason is habitat destruction. An alarming number of birds, animals and plants have become endangered during the past 100 years simply because we have destroyed so much of the natural habitat.

Some people get very upset about endangered species. Protestors sometimes disrupt public meetings or even camp out in trees for long periods of time to draw attention to the matter.

In our text for today, we find Jesus in an action of angry protest over something precious that was endangered - true worship.

Jesus came to the Temple and he discovered it was not the kind of setting which was conducive to true worship. Jesus became very angry. Unlike most of us, it took a lot to make Jesus angry. But the Scripture tells us that he got very angry when the habitat for true worship was endangered by the money changers in the Temple. He turned over the money changers tables and took a whip of cords and drove the animals away.

We can only use our imagination to picture what the scene must have been like in the Temple as Jesus found it. A preacher named Mary Zimmer describes the scene this way:

"The courtyard of the Temple smelled like a barnyard. Underneath the bleating of sheep and cattle noises you could hear the doves cooing in their cages. At low tables sat the money changers. The clink, clink of heavy coins was constant. And irritated, impatient voices were raised in arguments over the rates of exchange. The Temple courtyard was full of intense, busy people trying to get the best deal on an animal for the year's Passover offering. Even the most righteous Jews would have trouble praying in this place."

This story is found in all four gospels, but it has a unique position in the Gospel of John. Most of us remember this story as told by Matthew, Mark and Luke. All of them place this episode late in the life of Jesus, during the last week of his life. In Matthew, it is found in chapter 21, in Mark, chapter 11, and in Luke, chapter 19. But in John we find this story in chapter 2!

In the three Synoptic Gospels, the story is set after the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Jesus has rode into Jerusalem on Sunday with the people waving palm branches and shouting their "Hosannas." The next day, on Monday of Holy Week, Jesus went to the Temple, threw out the money changers, drove out the animals and said, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

In Matthew, Mark and Luke this story is a crisis-point that serves as one of the reasons leading to Jesus' crucifixion. But John sets this story at the beginning of his ministry to show it as a defining-point. The two stories in John chapter 2 are defining-point stories.

The first story in John chapter 2 is Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana. In this story, we are told about how they ran out of wine at the wedding. Jesus tells the steward to fill six stone jars with water, which he then turns into the finest wine. When the steward sips wine he finds it of such quality that he wonders why the host has saved the best wine for last.

Sometimes we struggle with the meaning of Jesus' first miracle. The tee-teetotallers among us would prefer that Jesus not make wine. But John adds a particular detail that we may miss in our fascination with all that wine: the stone jars filled with water were used for the rites of purification. That is an important detail for John and for Jesus. Jesus turns the waters of purification into wine.

Jesus overturns a system with purification at its centre. An elaborate system had been developed over the centuries which named some things "pure," others "impure." Women were impure for seven days after the birth of a son, fourteen days after the birth of a daughter. Dead bodies were impure. People with blemishes caused by leprosy and other diseases were impure. Certain foods were unclean. The list was very long.

Changing water into wine was not primarily a way to enhance a party - it was an act of transformation, a breaking down of boundaries, a different way of seeing the world and God's presence in it.

It is not accidental that the next action takes place in the temple for the temple had become the centre of the purity system. The animals being sold in the courtyard are for sacrificial purposes. The cattle, sheep and doves here are the proper animals for sacrifice, sold according to one's ability to pay. There were economic implications for purity: poor people were unable to buy the best animals.

Money-changers became a very important part of this system. Roman coins were considered impure and could not be used to buy sacrifices. The money-changers weren't simply giving change for a twenty - they were giving "pure" tokens in exchange for "impure" money...sometimes, for an extra fee.

Imagine an updated version of this story in our church today. Suppose everybody was required to make an offering when they came to church, but the church refused to accept money or regular checks. The new rule requires that all offerings to the church be made with a special credit card, perhaps one with a cross on it. Everyone must use that credit card to give their offering. And by the way, the church will make 25% on the exchange of your money! Nobody would be very happy with that arrangement, but it is very similar to what was taking place in the Temple.

The money-changers were making profit on the people's worship. Jesus was outraged by such profiteering piety! He threw them out of the Temple because they were hindering true worship. Jesus came into the temple not to be destructive or disruptive, but to draw us back to the heart of God. Jesus came to the temple to overturn every barrier that separates us from God.

Worship was endangered in the Temple, and I would suggest that worship may be endangered today as well. Too many people are selling out their worship experience to the dictates and trends of the culture. Worship may be endangered because of a loss of habitat, a loss of a setting which is conducive to worship.

One of the things that I value about our church is our kind of worship. Some would suggest that our service seems a little old fashioned - out of place today. But I like it because it is not showy, gaudy or glitzy.

In our worship we allow a time for you to meditate as we serve Communion and take the offering. We have beautiful music playing as we sit quietly and pray. We think that is important. Such quiet meditation is a stark contrast to those services where everything is a show and for show.

The experience of transcendence is becoming increasingly rare in our culture. Amidst the noise, activity and technology of modern life, it is becoming more and more difficult to find a time or place where we are drawn out of ourselves and experience something of God's holy presence.

Religion has become big business. Worship has too often been transformed into entertainment events. We have to work hard to make sure that the ecology of worship is not poisoned. We need to be concerned that worship does not become an endangered experience. Jesus drove out of the Temple those who were taking advantage of such situations.

As our passage ends, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The confused Jews responded, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" And then John writes in verse 26, "But he was speaking of the temple of his body."

The temple could no longer serve as the dwelling place for God's Spirit. In cleansing the temple, Jesus also pointed to its replacement. Jesus would tell us that genuine worship is when we come to him. He would be the new temple, the place where the divine-human encounter takes place. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." Our worship is focused in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Temple of God, the mediator of God.

We need to make sure that we don't let our environment become so cluttered that we miss the essence of real worship. When we come into the presence of Jesus Christ, he brings us to God.

Jesus cleansing of the temple is a challenge for us to restore the natural habitat of worship. The ecology of worship is fragile and easily damaged.

Have you thought about the ecology of worship in your own life? I think that can mean many things for us. It means for us to place a priority on being in the place of worship. It also means that we provide those times in our lives when we get away from the busy-ness and the stress of life. We need those times to focus on God, read the Bible and pray.

If we are so busy with life that we endanger those moments of worship, Jesus would like to come into our lives and overturn a few money tables and throw out a few of the distractions. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." Instead, it is to be a place of worship where we come face to face with Jesus Christ.