

# The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

## Sermon

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### **Sunday 3 March 2024: Angela Hannafin**

Good morning and welcome to the first Sofa Sermon in March. Today's reading is from John's gospel:

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<sup>13</sup> It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover celebration, so Jesus went to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the Temple area he saw merchants selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices; he also saw dealers at tables exchanging foreign money. <sup>15</sup> Jesus made a whip from some ropes and chased them all out of the Temple. He drove out the sheep and cattle, scattered the money changers' coins over the floor, and turned over their tables. <sup>16</sup> Then, going over to the people who sold doves, he told them, "Get these things out of here. Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup> Then his disciples remembered this prophecy from the Scriptures: "Passion for God's house will consume me." <sup>18</sup> But the Jewish leaders demanded, "What are you doing? If God gave you authority to do this, show us a miraculous sign to prove it." <sup>19</sup> "All right," Jesus replied. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

<sup>20</sup> "What!" they exclaimed. "It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?" <sup>21</sup> But when Jesus said "this temple," he meant his own body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said.

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I've just come back from General Synod, the legislative body of the Church of England, which meets a couple of times a year to debate and decide on important issues. It's a fairly complex organisation which has taken me a few years to get to grips with. The last couple of Synod sessions have been testy, to say the least, and fairly draining to sit through, with tensions between people with differing views, largely on same-sex issues. This Synod, though, was better, probably because there was a wider breadth of material to be debated. But also, perhaps, because on quite a few issues, there was less contention and we were all united. There was a debate on the importance of racial justice. We all agreed to continue to fight against racism and welcome new initiatives to increase our diversity. There was a debate on the need to develop the church's engagement with Estates Evangelism. We also want to establish a Christian worshipping presence in estates and raise up local leaders from those contexts. There was a very interesting debate on whether there needs to be a code of conduct for church leaders and how we can protect clergy who are being bullied by lay people. All of these issues

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## Sermon

---

were met with an overwhelming majority of support, driven by an understanding that the status quo is not right. It is unjust.

It's for the same reason of injustice that Jesus acts in such a dramatic way in the gospel reading. For anyone who thinks of Jesus as 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' needs to remember this passage. God does get angry when things are not right, and human beings are not acting in the way they should. We know this because Jesus, God with skin on, reacts to the Temple being treated as a place for commerce instead of a place for prayer. Rather than the temple being a holy place dedicated to God, it would have been noisy with cattle, sheep and doves. This was a place where God had been overlooked for financial gain. It must have been astonishing for the disciples to watch Jesus being so angry, whipping people out of the temple, turning over the tables and chasing the animals out.

There's an obviously broad application of this. God wants us to be engaged in the world he has made and to be his ambassador for justice. We all need to stand up for the rights of those who can't fight or can't be heard and work out what we can do with our lives to stand up for God. Even if you can just put a stamp on an envelope, or click a button on your computer, you can make a difference. I read this week that we now live in a world which is VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. I would agree with that but also think there should be no cop out to disengage in whatever injustice it is that we're fighting against. The needs of the poor, the homeless, the displaced, the children of this world etc... the list goes on. Looking inward and saying 'aren't we lucky' is never good for a disciple of Christ. Instead, our gratitude towards of God's blessings and his goodness to us are an incentive to keep looking out, sharing our resources and our hope with those who need it. And there is a place for righteous anger, as we call it, in other words that anger that comes from seeing that God's beautiful world is being wrecked.

There's also the poignancy of this passage being read in Lent. We're in this special time when we can devote more time to our relationship with God and prepare ourselves to celebrate the 'bursting forth in glorious day', as the song goes, when Jesus rises from the tomb. In the context of Lent, though, this passage seems a bit scary. God clearly doesn't like it when love of things and love of money is put before him. We don't need to be frightened of God since we know perfect love drives out fear, but it is a fitting passage for Lent. It's clear that our sin bothers God. Our constant our love of self and desire to accumulate more and more, with our relationship of God being put second, isn't right. And if we think we're ok on this one, let's remember the words of John, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. Yes, we're all united again on this issue. We're all messed up.

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Left to our own devices, this passage can feel a bit hopeless. But we have the reassurance in the last part. The ultimate sign that the Jews ask for, Jesus tells them, is that the temple will be destroyed and rebuilt three days later. Not this physical temple, but Jesus' own body, whose life will end in a violent and shocking way, only for God's presence and power to raise him up three days later. Left to our own devices, things aren't good. But Jesus is our hope, and the future resurrection of Jesus at the end of Holy Week will prove that now there is nothing that can separate us from his love. Not even our own worst enemies, ourselves.

I came to my parish as a new incumbent to hear someone say, "we don't put flowers in the church in Lent". I'm still thinking about that. I can appreciate the symbolism but I'd like to know if a less pretty church actually makes us reflect on our own selfishness and actually changes our behaviour. I'm not sure it does. Maybe a small bunch of daffodils somewhere will remind us of the goodness and blessings of God, which are showered on us day after day despite our constant inability to get it right with God. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, and ask for his grace and mercy to fill us afresh today as we journey with him. AMEN.