

Lent 3 2018, St Lawrence's 9.30

I don't know if you've come across the website www.jesus-is.org. It's a website which invites people to say what Jesus means to them by simply completing the sentence 'Jesus is

You may be surprised by what you find there. For example, there are positive comments like: 'Jesus is never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down'; and 'Jesus is relighting my fire.'

But there are also rather hostile ones: 'Jesus is a fabricated lie to steal your thoughts and money'; and 'Jesus is one of the worst characters in all fiction.'

Then, inevitably, there are the whacky comments: 'Jesus is expert in all martial arts'; 'Jesus is in the study with the candlestick'. And finally a comment which shows what one person thinks of the site: 'Jesus is getting tired of reading these.'

Which brings us to John's account of the 'cleansing of the temple' – an incident which John includes to provide his own ending to the phrase 'Jesus is' But in order to appreciate this it will help if we begin by recognizing that John's account presents us with something of a mystery.

The other three gospels all report the cleansing of the temple, but whereas they put it towards the very *end* of Jesus' ministry, John places it at the *beginning*. A variety of theories have been offered to explain how this came about. Perhaps the most unusual theory is that John left his gospel written out on separate sheets of papyrus and not bound together. As a result, the sheet containing the account of the cleansing of the temple was somehow misplaced and then mistakenly inserted at the beginning instead of near the end!

I don't think anyone follows that particular line of thought today. Most scholars now believe that all four gospel writers *edited* the material they had about Jesus in order to fit their theological purpose – to fit what they wanted to say about God.

So when John puts the cleansing of the temple at the start of his gospel he has a very good reason for doing so. He isn't making an error – he's emphasizing a point. And the point John wants to make is all about giving an answer to the question 'Who exactly is Jesus? Who is this man?'

In the opening chapter of his gospel John has given his first response to this question. Jesus is the eternal Word of God made flesh; he is a light come to dispel the darkness. Later in the gospel John will report a number of 'I am' sayings of Jesus – 'I am the resurrection and the life'; 'I am the bread of life'; 'I am the light of the world.' John wants to help his readers really *encounter* Jesus.

So what does John want to say about Jesus in his account of the cleansing of the temple? I think he wants to tell us that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

Only the Messiah can have the authority needed to pass judgment on the religion and on the ritual of the Temple in Jerusalem. Only the Messiah has the right to take such strong action to destroy the abuses of Temple worship.

John makes this even clearer when he tells us that the disciples who are watching his actions immediately recall a verse from Psalm 69: 'Zeal for your house has consumed me.'

Many believed this Psalm to refer to the expected Messiah – the Messiah, when he came, would be recognized by his great zeal for the house of God, for the Temple.

So, in the first chapter of his gospel John has tried to explain Jesus' significance in a way that people who are not Jewish will understand. The Greeks would have been familiar with the concept of the *Logos*, the Word. The great Persian religion of Zoroastrianism would have understood the idea of the conflict between light and darkness. Now, in the second chapter, we find John talking about Jesus in a way that the Jewish people can understand – Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, as God's anointed one.

In all this, John draws us back to that which is central to Christian faith – he draws us back to the person of Jesus.

We're always to remember that being Christian isn't primarily about what we do in church; and it isn't primarily about following a particular code of behaviour. Being Christian is about remaining focused on Jesus Christ.

Later in this Gospel John will record Jesus' words: 'I am the way, and the truth and the life.' Jesus doesn't *teach* us the way; he doesn't *tell* us what's true; he doesn't *coach* us in how to live life. Jesus himself is these things.

Perhaps Lent is an appropriate time to get to know Jesus again. Maybe take one of the four gospels, read it several times, and then ask ourselves: 'How shall I complete the sentence 'Jesus is?'' If we need some help in this we could look through the hymns in our hymn books. There's a wealth of reflection on the person of Jesus in the words, and it's more than likely we'll find something that says what we want to say in answer to the question, 'Jesus is ...'

Let's pray for an ever-deepening understanding of our Lord – of what he means to us in our life as it is *today*; in our *world* as it is today.

Let's pray for an ever-deepening understanding of the encouragement we might find in a new encounter with Jesus Christ; of the challenges he's laying before us; of the opportunities he's opening up; of the joy that a life lived close to him will bring us.