

Matthew 21:12-22
Pigeons, prayer and pretence

Worship, pure, simple and fruitful

Have you ever wondered why it is that **good habits** are hard to keep, whereas **bad habits** are hard to break? Why is it that way around?

Part of it, I think, is most likely about effort. Good habits can just take more effort in and of themselves. It's obviously a lot more effort to go out for a **run**, or even a **walk**, than to carry on with a box-set **bingewatch**.

Even if the new habit will be a time- or effort-saver in the long run, there's an effort in learning that new skill. I still consider myself really fortunate that thirty years ago, there was a break between two projects back in my lab days, when we were told to just make sure we did some useful stuff for a while, and I learned **touch typing** on the early computer systems that we had back in those days (one per whole laboratory!) It has saved me immense amounts of time over the years, but it took hours of training to get the memory of where the keyboard letters are into my fingers.

But I don't think that effort alone will explain it. I think there's also a question of reward. Do we consider the payback sufficient for the effort? How much do we really value being able to **run 5K**, for example. So even if we do manage the **couch to 5K challenge** ... do we think it's worth *maintaining* that ability?

What happens if there's even more incentive to get back to the good old days of the bad old ways? I think that's what we see here in this passage we've just read.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, ...

(Matthew 21:12)

If you read all four gospels, those parallel accounts of the life of Jesus, you will notice something curious about this. Matthew places this particular incident right at the end of the timeline, in that final week of conflict in and around the Jewish temple. Whereas John records ... is it the same incident, or did it happen twice? ... something at least very similar back at the *start* of his version of things:

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.

(John 2:13-14)

And some people argue that there is so much that is similar that these two accounts must be of the same incident. They would say that we would nowadays presume an orderly chronology as you go through their accounts - so what you read in a chapter 10, for example, would follow in time what you read in chapter 8 - but

that's simply the convention that we expect nowadays, and authors back then didn't regard that as so strictly necessary. And that's probably a fair point to consider at times.

And other people would argue that the details are sufficiently different - it's only John, for example, who mentions Jesus making a whip to move people along - that they must be two different events.

I think I come down on this position, myself, because there is that basic fact of our human condition: it is so easy to gravitate back to a bad habit. And in this case there is an overwhelming motive that would drive things that way: **money, profit**. What was happening in the temple, described here in these several locations in the Bible, although it was inhumane, it was lucrative. I can just see it happening. The temple is "cleansed" - that's the favourite word for it - by Jesus at the start of his ministry ... and a couple of years later, despite any good intentions that might have been made, it has just returned to what it was before.

So it requires that ***Jesus again cleanses the Temple of the fruitless corruption of supposed worship, so well symbolised by the fruitless fig tree***

The bustling temple (12-17)

The barren tree (18-22)

- **The bustling temple (12-17)**

So we left Matthew 21 last week with the city of Jerusalem all a-buzz, after Jesus has arrived there in a scene deliberately chosen to hark back to something predicted by one of the nation's prophets:

"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

(Matthew 21:5)

The result was likened to an earthquake - but an earthquake associated with a question and an answer concerning this particular person:

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

(Matthew 21:10-11)

And it might look, the way Matthew relates it, that the next thing that Jesus did at this point was to enter the temple and respond as we read earlier.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, ...

(Matthew 21:12)

I think we just need to hang a bit loose on that deduction about the details of timing. Soon after, yes, but perhaps not immediately. It is far more a question of *what* Jesus then chose to do, rather than the precise sequence and timing. And not just what, but *why*? What was he most objecting to, and why? I think Matthew gives a clue to that with a single verse that we often overlook:

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.

(Matthew 21:14)

So what's actually happening here, the detail behind the disaster that Matthew is recording for us? Let's zoom in a bit on what he's meaning by that word "temple" - and so well brought out in those Bible quotes he follows up with.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

(Matthew 21:12)

So the temple was supposed to have an orderly arrangement to it. And you'd expect that, because, remember,

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

(1 Corinthians 14:33)

So in that OT system - yes, we're reading from the NT, but it's still coming to the end of the OT way of doing things - there was the place where God was considered symbolically, at least, to dwell and reside: the Holy of Holies. Human permission to enter that was almost totally non-existent. Just the High Priest, just once a year, and with a *lot* of religious ceremonial conducted around it - you can read some of that in the book we call Hebrews.

At the front of the Holy of Holies, there's a thick curtain. It's still in place, at the time Matthew is describing. That's all going to be changed within a week, when Jesus doesn't just challenge the system but totally shatters it. The amazing thing is going to be that instead of one man, once a year, that "place where God dwells" symbolically is going to be *symbolically* opened to everyone:

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

(Matthew 27:50-51)

But, just a week before that, Holy of Holies, still intact. And outside that, the next **concentric circle**, the "Holy Place" or "sanctuary", priests only. Then the "court of Israel", Jewish men only. Then the "court of the women", the nearest that Jewish women were allowed to come. And finally, outside that, the "court of the Gentiles".

But there were rules about sacrifices that should be made at the temple, by the priests, on behalf of the people. If people were coming from any distance, it wouldn't make sense for them to bring their own animals all that distance - so you can see how a trade in animals could develop. It could have started up totally innocent, and totally fair. But, human nature being what it is, that's an **unstable equilibrium**. It is a situation that is so easily exploitable.

And there was also the temple tax to pay. It was required to pay that in specific coinage, again, initially, so that only fair and legitimate coinage could be used in these transactions - so you can see how a trade in money could develop.

You could see entirely the same sort of thing nowadays, in our own church, with totally honorable intentions. In the last year, when we've been unable to attend the building - and those of you who are here in person today might notice that the **white box** at the back has been sealed off - we've had to establish a way in which people could continue to make financial offerings to support the work of the church. It means that it has been more difficult to make anonymous gifts, if things get flagged up on bank account statements, but there's no intention to check up on the amounts anyone is or isn't giving. Only ... it *could* be done ... and fallen human nature means that we should remain alert to the subtle temptation, and then make sure it *doesn't*.

Only there were not such systems in place back in Jerusalem. And corruption had spread into what could have been an honourable system.

So **money** has to be changed. If providing money-changing facilities is your employment, the only way to make a living from that is to charge for it: a commission. We're used enough to that if we need to **buy Euros** or other foreign currency. The conversion rate when you buy is different from the rate when you sell. You can, if you wish, shop around for a better deal somewhere else.

But not at the Jerusalem temple. You're caught. You can't use your foreign **funny money** here. So you have to take the conversion rates that are on offer, even if they're extortionate.

Oh, and then, the **animals** that you need to buy for those sacrifices. If you bring your own, they will be examined to see if they're good enough - and they might be rejected. On the other hand, you could buy these guaranteed-approved animals or birds on site - possibly being required to use your temple-system-approved money, too. Another opportunity for a mark-up, most likely inflated because it is a sellers' market.

And that isn't the worst of it. Where is all of this happening? Somewhere outside those courts I told you about? Seems to be that it was that outer court, the court of the Gentiles, that was being used to site these questionable trades. Because why do we really need to bother with *Gentiles*, anyway, those *dogs*?

But just hold on a minute! Why bother with the Gentiles? Go back to the start, and Israel becomes Israel so that God's blessing may come to *non-Israel* too. God's first recorded words to Abraham:

"... I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

(Genesis 12:2-3)

And yet right here, in the place specifically appointed for those Gentiles to draw close, as close as they were permitted to get, to the true God, this racket is taking place instead. Perhaps racket in two senses: the **racket** of the exploitation of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem; and possibly just the **racket** in the sense of noise, with all the purchases being transacted, all the animals being shuffled around ...

Can you imagine any Gentile coming into the middle of that and feeling that they had any welcome at all in that place? In fact, what about *inside* those walls, with this unholy din being generated just a few yards away ... how much do you think anyone there will find in the way of peace? How does that fit with the ancient psalm?

***I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"
... Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"***

(Psalms 122:1,7)

You've even got the Hebrew word for "peace" within the name of JeruSaLeM. Instead, there's a **cattle market**.

And I wonder if there is a hint here that it is even worse than just noise and *unwelcome*. Is there something that is particularly taking advantage of the poor, too? Notice which particular kind of livestock Matthew zooms in on:

... the seats of those who sold pigeons.

(Matthew 21:12)

Without trying to be insulting, pigeons were the poorer man's offering, but not the poorest.

"But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering."

(Leviticus 5:7)

"But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering."

(Leviticus 5:11)

So I'm wondering if pigeons are what you might call, in modern terminology, a "working-class" offering. The "unwaged", as we call them nowadays, might have been unable to afford that, and needed to resort to the flour by way of offering. But

pigeons are the offering for the people with the lowest disposable income. And it is those, I'm suspecting, who are being fleeced the most by this obscene racket being run in the name of religion.

Overall effect: the most vulnerable people are the ones being most affected by this evil trade. Is it any wonder that Jesus reacts so strongly against this. Politeness is not necessary at this point, or ever appropriate. A proper anger, I am imagining, fuels his muscular response.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

(Matthew 21:12)

And it is justified, as so often, by appeal to the Scriptures: reference to the original intention for the Temple ... and an allusion to a scurrilous situation in the OT that fitted like a hand in a glove. What was the temple supposed to be for? For *all* nations, Gentiles expressly included, if you go back to Isaiah.

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

(Isaiah 56:6-7)

These are the ones *being prevented* from drawing near, the way things have been allowed to descend to. To descend to *again*, if we're right that Jesus first came and vigorously assaulted those practices just a couple of years earlier.

And folks, we need to stop and think to make sure we're not doing anything like it ourselves here, too, as things open up again and we are hopefully excited about seeing each other again in person.

What are we doing, in terms of making what we do accessible to “outsiders”, people who are not familiar with our ways of doing things, people who haven't known everyone else for years? Do we welcome people who don't know the ropes yet? Do we change gear appropriately when someone new is around, or do we continue to assume that they will be as familiar as most of the regulars here

- **The barren tree (18-22)**

Worship, pure, simple and fruitful