

Coming Home

Matthew 21:1-7

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

Then Jesus entered the temple of God, and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple... He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robber's den." (Matthew 21:12-13)

Last weekend, as you know, I was away, attending meetings in Spain. On the way home my group got caught up in the bad weather over Paris, and our flight was delayed, meaning that we finally got in to Edinburgh on Tuesday morning, not Monday night. All those extra hours, I was very much looking forward to the minute when I opened the door of the Manse and finally got home!

When Jesus came to Jerusalem on that day, it wasn't just the city he was making for, but a particular building in the city. He was making for the temple. Just as most of us look forward to the end of a journey, not just in general, but looking, imagining ourselves in a particular place of peace, so Jesus was coming home.

Early in his life he had identified the temple as his Father's house - remember? When he was twelve and his parents couldn't find him, he turned up there, in the temple and asking "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). Even then he thought of the temple as home. In those days it was a place where he could learn, an exciting place for a boy to discover his parentage and get to know more about his Father and his destiny.

The temple then was much as he found it on this day of triumph and anger - a place full of corruption and extortion, but as a boy he had not seen what was wrong, only what was good. Maturity brings a wider perspective.

Imagine yourself coming home weary after a long journey. What you hope will happen is that you will walk up to the door, put in the key, go in and find everything clean and tidy, just as you left it, just as you need it to be so that you can relax and rest and then go on with your life. What you don't need is that, for instance, you lose the key - as once happened to my family when I was a teenager. That day our pleasant homecoming was enlivened by a policeman helping us break into our own house!

But what if things are not as you want to find them?

It happened to Jesus. He knew it would. He wasn't going to Jerusalem in total ignorance of what went on in his Father's house. He had more than a shrewd suspicion of what he would find.

It happened to me once. When I was living in Chicago, one of my friends, Dennis, befriended a young, deaf homeless boy named Stephen. It seemed to Dennis that the best thing to do would be to give Stephen a temporary home with him, which was fine. But then Dennis had to go away, and he was reluctant to leave Stephen in his fairly luxurious flat. I was to be away that same week. I was taking a party of teenagers from my church to spend a week mending homes in a poor community in the Appalachians. We worked by day and slept on the floor of the school by night.

My flat was anything but luxurious. It had bare floors, and was furnished with a bed, a desk, two chairs and a bookcase. There was nothing to steal. Dennis didn't exactly say that, but he implied it when he suggested that I let Stephen live in my flat while I was gone. A little reluctantly I agreed.

Jesus approached Jerusalem amid a cheering crowd. He had planned it this way, but still it must have been more than a little unnerving. He would be tired too, tired from three years on the road, tired from always being with people, always being in demand, always teaching, healing, trying to help others understand. In all this time he had been to the synagogue when he could get there, but seldom to the temple. Much of his praying had been done alone, in the open air. Now, with what he knew was the most difficult part of his life before him, he just wanted to get home, to his Father's house, to spend some time with his Father before the next arduous thing. Which was all very well until he entered the gates of the temple courts.

Time came for me to get home. I had had only fitful sleep on a hard floor for a week, and arduous physical work. I had driven a minibus for hundreds of miles, and I was more than just a little weary. I had almost forgotten about Stephen - until I unlocked the door of my flat.

Jesus had known what he would find, and he found it. There were people changing money, from Shekels into temple money - at an exorbitant rate of exchange. Three were people selling pigeons, sheep and cattle, insisting that no sacrifice could be done except using temple-approved live-stock. There was noise, there was bustle. The business of prayer had become just that, a business, and there was no place for the Son of God to rest with his Father in his home.

I had never dreamed what I would find - just how bad it would be - my clothes all over the floor, my sheets rolled up in a bundle and the bed pulled into the middle of the floor. Dirty pots and dishes. Books scattered. There was no sign of Stephen - he turned up again in the small hours of the morning - but there was also no possibility of resting and relaxing in my home. I discovered then, what I have found many times, that strong emotion - whether it is love or anger, can give un-guessed at energy. And so I set to, taking bedding and clothing to the communal laundry in the basement, sweeping and washing the floor, washing the dishes, tidying and mending the books, and getting everything just right. If, when I had arrived at my front door for the first time, anyone had asked me if I had any energy left to spend a couple of hours in intensive housework, I should never have believed it, but my home was violated, and the strength came.

So for Jesus, the violation of a place which he thought of as "home" gave him energy and passion to do something, and so he did. He drove them out. Men and animals went scurrying down the temple steps, while money-changers scabbled around on the floor to retrieve their scattered coins before they too left. Earlier in the day Jesus had needed a donkey, and one was provided - probably by previous arrangement. Now he needs to see his Father's house being used in the right way, and so, with some effort he does.

St. Paul likens our bodies to temples for God. He says that we are places where God lives, where God is to be worshipped. "God's temple," he says, "Is holy, and you are that temple." (1 Corinthians 3:17) It's a sobering thought. At the beginning of Lent we often talk blithely of what we are going to give up - chocolate or alcohol or biscuits or whatever, and we too readily think of this as a time when our bodies can benefit from a

little restraint. No doubt they can, but that is not the point. When we give something up it is for both the health of the body and the spring-cleaning of the soul. For we are more than a body, and we are more than just a soul. We are complete people, with the earthly bodily part and the eternal part as well, and it is as a whole person that we are a temple for God.

This Easter Jesus is coming home. He is coming to the temple of God - to the temples of God, and what will he find there? Will he find it all swept and ready for him? Lent is not yet over, there is still time to take action and make the temple which is you a place of prayer.

Palm Sunday was some day for Jesus. He was acclaimed by the crowds, cheered by the children, angered by the temple and confronted by the chief priests. As we approach Easter, if Jesus is coming home to us, so we are coming home as well. We are coming home to the bed-rock of our faith. We are coming home to the truth that Jesus died for our sins and rose again from death. Easter day is next Sunday and Easter is a wonderful season of celebration. We may look forward to it, thinking that coming home we can relax. But if we want to be at home, to be in our proper place there is first work to do.

First we must stay with Jesus. We must cleanse the temples which are us, and stay with him through dispute, betrayal, denial and crucifixion. We are holding services on Thursday and Friday to help you do that. But if you can't make it to one of them, then take time to pray, to read about the last week in one of the gospels, to think and to act. To walk with Jesus through confrontation and controversy towards violence is not a pleasant thought. But if we cannot do this, then how can we walk with him to the places which know controversy, to the people who live with violence. If we cannot walk with Jesus into his passion and death, how can we be used by him to help others in their need?

And if we will not face the cross, how can we celebrate Easter, and bring that joy to the world?

God grant us energy and grace to cleanse the temple, and walk homewards with his Son. Amen.