

John 2:13-22 Sermon for 11am

Where can you go to meet God? What would an encounter with God himself look like?

I don't know if you ever lie awake in bed at night and think about what it might be like to have a moment or two directly encountering God. How would you feel? What would it change? What would you ask?

Most people in the world accept some sort of an idea of God's existence. Deep down, even beneath anything we can explain rationally, there is something in us that nags us about it. Our difficulty is that for us, it is hard to have the encounter that we really crave with God. He appears illusive or absent most of the time and we end up reacting by either dismissing him – but that feels somehow wrong; or by accepting some ethereal God in all our surroundings that we can ignore and conjure up when we need it – but that, if we are honest, seems a little like wishing. Otherwise, we are left with the idea that God exists and can be encountered, but seems a bit difficult to come by.

In today's reading, we have the story of Jesus causing a mini riot in the temple in Jerusalem just before a key Jewish festival. This was the temple where the Jews believed that heaven touched earth. The place on earth where God lived and could be found. But in this reading we have Jesus saying some shocking things which amount to claiming that the way to meet God is to be found in an encounter with Jesus himself. For the Jewish people of the time, there were lots of requirements on approach to the temple which meant the need for lots of traders and merchants changing money and selling animals, but Jesus simply cuts through that, and fairly obliquely, he announces that to meet God, you need to meet Jesus, and, on one hand there shouldn't be barriers to that meeting, but on the other, purity and cleanness were still really important to any meeting with God.

The Passover celebration was near. This was the celebration of the release of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt to go to meet with God and worship him. This forms an important backdrop since the timing puts this whole episode into context. The people of Israel were being freed, not just because their slavery was bad (and of course, it was) but they were being freed in order that they could worship God. The background is that Jesus has come to Jerusalem, to the temple, to celebrate the freedom of his people and their freedom to worship the God who had previously liberated them.

He entered the temple, God's own house, and instead of freedom of worship and purity of access to God, he found systems set up to enable correct worship but which also were an example of organised religion profiting through its perceived role as a gatekeeper to God. There were people selling animals for use as a sacrifice and there were money changers – people whose role was to change the sacrilegious Roman money of the day to an acceptable form of currency for use in giving within the temple. All of these traders provided access to being able to worship God, but all at a profit.

I'm not here to discuss the rights and wrongs of this trading. But somehow, something which was intended as an enabling system for people to access God had turned into something which profaned God's house. Jesus had turned up to celebrate God's saving of his people to give them access to himself, only to find access blocked and the presence of God polluted by this market place.

Clearly, for Jesus, the purity of access to God was important. He didn't mince his words, but instead led a one-man riot to clean up the area. For us, it is important that he refers to the temple as his

Father's house. Jesus didn't deny God's presence in the temple, but the temple had been desecrated by what went on there. In fact, his friends noted that his fervour reminded them of a Psalm where the zeal for God's house was a sign of a servant of God.

So for us, there are two things from this first section of the reading. One is that access to God must not be blocked. And the other is that it must not be taken too lightly either. God's presence remains set apart from human attempts to sell access to it. God cannot be bought or sold. His presence must not be blocked or humanised to the point where we profit from being gatekeepers to the Almighty!

There is tension here for us as a church – we cannot complicate our worship of God so much that we create barriers to those who would come to worship with us, but we also must not cheapen it. And in thinking about money, we do not give in order to gain access to God, but instead we give in order to support God's work as a result of our gladness about all that he has done for us. Jesus is violently opposed to all who put barriers in the way of encountering God and who seek to profit by controlling this access.

The second half of the reading starts with a question. Effectively, the people in charge ask "who do you think you are to be causing a riot in the temple and criticising the system here?" They are asking for a defence of Jesus' actions and some sort of proof of his authority to do what he has done. Jesus's answer is oblique but really important. He equates his "Father's House" in verse 16 with "This temple" which he refers to meaning his own resurrected body. It's quite a jump for us. Even the language in verse 19 is more of an ironic challenge; "go ahead and do this and we'll see what happens." Jesus is challenging them to destroy him, knowing that after three days he would rise from the dead – such is the Easter story.

However, the important bit for us today, is Jesus's equating of his own body to the temple – the place where God could be encountered on Earth. He is effectively saying, "If you want to meet God, look no further!" The temple was the place where heaven touched earth; where God could be found and so by referring to himself as the temple, Jesus claimed to be that place where heaven touches earth and where God can be met directly.

It's a huge claim, and one which probably we wouldn't understand or believe if it happened to us today. But the sign that it is a credible claim is that Jesus did indeed get destroyed and then rebuilt three days later. He was killed on a Friday on the first Easter and then rose again from the dead on Easter Sunday. When this happened, the disciples, Jesus's closest friends, realised what he had meant and believed him. Jesus is the place where God comes to live with his people and by seeing Jesus, we see God himself in a direct and unmediated way.

If you recall, this takes us back to the first half of the reading because it required no special traders to meet Jesus; instead he was effectively the personification of the Passover story, that people were released from the temple rules and merchant systems to meet God directly and worship him. Jesus is the person in whom all these stories from the Old history of Israel about the trials of meeting God and the difficulties with it come to fruition. He is the person who is God walking and talking with his people.

But you'll remember the purity issues of the cleansing of the temple from the first half too? There is a hint of God's future kingdom hidden in the passage based on the wording Jesus used about market traders. It is reference to a prophecy by a man called Zechariah who looked forward to a world

where, after God's promised Messiah had come – the one who was expected to bring the world into a new relationship with God – a new order would be established where there would be no need for merchants in the temple (and a whole host of other things too).

Jesus claims to be that Messiah and to usher in that new world where access to God is direct and free and where we bring what we have to God rather than changing it or profiting by it.

So what would an encounter with God look like?

It would look like Jesus. It would look like God walking our Earth and living with his people, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, loving the poor, and teaching us all. It would look like Jesus - re-writing the rules of access to God, angry at human profiteering from putting obstacles in the way of people coming to him, and re-envisioning a new world where God can be encountered.

Where do you go to meet with God?

The place to go to meet God is to go to Jesus. He is God come down to live with us and he is still accessible today in the stories that were written down so we could know him. In prayer. By the Spirit of God who can live within us if we let him. By the bread and wine of communion. In his church. And by seeking to follow Jesus day by day.

If you've never met with God and you want to, please come and talk to me after, but also read some of the stories of Jesus in the Bible. In this morning's story, Jesus claims to be God's place on earth; the person in whom we can have contact with God himself, proven by Jesus's resurrection from the dead, meaning that he is alive today to meet us, in whatever way that may be, as we come to him in prayer.

Amen.