

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; Ps 46 (45); 1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17; John 2:13-32

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up

John 2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today is the feast of the Lateran Basilica, Rome's cathedral church. As such, this feast celebrates our worldwide communion, with the bishop of Rome as symbol of unity. The readings—special for the feast—are varied and rich and, for a change, all three readings are focused on the one theme of temple.

As is well-known, the Temple was the heart of Israelite religion. As the same time, temple symbolism is used

across the New Testament to explore the identity of Jesus, our risen saviour.

The Temple Action is recounted in all four Gospels. The John version is different in location (moved to the front of the Gospel, a kind of "answer" to the wedding feast of Cana) and in theology (the shift is from the temple to the person of Jesus as the locus of worship). The contrasts with the Synoptic accounts are highly instructive.

Mark 11:15 *Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; 16 and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."*

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The importance of the Temple is apparent from many texts and stories attached to it in the Hebrew Bible. In John's form of the story reference is made to the Psalms.

KIND OF WRITING

To enjoy this reading, we should bear in mind two considerations.

(i) Within the biblical tradition we find prophetic actions, that is, mini-dramas, by which the prophets make plain their message. There are many of these in the Hebrew Bible and in the Jesus tradition (the Baptism by John; the Call of the Twelve; Open Table Fellowship; the Healings and

Thought for the day

The cathedral of Rome is dedicated to our Saviour, under the intercession of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. All of us are baptised into Christ; all of us receive the word of life through the Scriptures; all of us belong to the body of Christ, the church and we all eat the one bread and drink the one cup. Our local communion—constituted by faith, community, scripture and the sacraments—is part of a greater family, under the bishop of Rome, who "presides over the whole assembly in charity" (St Ignatius of Antioch).

Prayer

Jesus, you prayed that all might be one. As you give us the grace to be truly one in heart, give us also the freedom to live with difference and the wisdom to enjoy the variety of your gifts

Exorcisms; the taking of a Little Child; the Entry into Jerusalem; the cursing of the fig tree; the Temple Action; the Last Supper). The Temple Action probably led to the final "push" against Jesus.

(ii) As received in the Fourth Gospel, the Temple Action has an overlay of theology. The light of Jesus' own resurrection shines through the whole story.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The imagery of temple/corner stone resounds throughout the NT. "Temple" is a theme in all four gospels, the Acts, Paul, Ephesians and the Apocalypse. "Cornerstone" is an image in the synoptics, Acts, Ephesians and 1Pet. Christ as the "living stone" (mixed metaphor?) is found clearly in these texts.

Come to him, a *living stone*, though

rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like *living stones*, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a *stone*, a *cornerstone* chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The *stone* that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner;" and "A *stone* that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. (1Peter 2:4-8)

(ii) The vocabulary of sacrifice(s) and offering(s) is all over the NT, occurring in total 75 times, of which 29 occur in Hebrews, teaching that the death of Jesus brings an end to the Temple system as such.

(iii) The tradition of "made with human hand" and "not made with human hands" is part of the Temple reinterpretation, as we can see:

"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, *not made with hands*.'" (Mark 14:58) Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses *made with human hands*; as the prophet says. (Acts 7:48) The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines *made by human hands*. (Acts 17:24) For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house *not made with hands*, eternal in the heavens. (2Cor. 5:1) So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision *made in the flesh by human hands*. (Eph. 2:11)

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ. (Col. 2:11) But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (*not made with hands*,

that is, not of this creation) (Heb. 9:11) For Christ did not enter a sanctuary *made by human hands*, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Heb. 9:24)

(iv) The Temple in the case against Jesus: He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My *house* shall be called a *house* of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mk 11:17) As he came out of the *temple*, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large *stones* and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one *stone* will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (Mk 13:1-2) Some stood up and gave *false* testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this *temple* that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (Mk 14:57-58) Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the *temple* and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" (Mk 15:29-30)

(iv) Within the Fourth Gospel, the most important connecting texts are the story of the Samaritan Woman (John 4) and the "high priestly" prayer in the Farewell Discourse (John 17). These make it clear that the new "locus" of worship will be not a place or a system but a relationship.

ST PAUL

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1Corinthians 6:19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 The Passover context is significant in John, taking us to the paschal mystery itself.

Verse 14 This absolutely normal and even essential for the functioning of the Temple, according to the biblical tradition.

Verse 15 This is the prophet gesture

—an action which invites interrogation.

Verse 16 The saying interprets the action, at the level of John's Gospel. By the time the Gospel was written, all of this had ceased, of course.

Verse 17 This editorial comment looks backwards and forwards. Backwards to the psalm cited. Forwards to the Spirit-inspired remembrance and new understanding which marked the new community after the resurrection of the Lord.

Verse 18 This is the point of interrogation. It may be historical, but its real import in the Fourth Gospel is the conversation at the time of writing with the "synagogue across the road."

Verse 19 This is a typical Johannine technique of ambiguity. Jesus means his death and resurrection. His interlocutors understand the reply literally.

Verse 20 This is the literal misunderstanding.

Verse 21 The editor's voice intervenes again, making the meaning clear.

Verse 22 Finally, the later understanding of the Temple Action and the Temple saying is illustrated here and marked by the response of faith.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Through his symbolic gesture Jesus proclaimed that the place of God's presence was not a building but "the temple of his body". But we are the Body of Christ ... when have you been particularly aware of people (yourself or others) as being sacred, temples of the presence of God?

2. It was only after the resurrection that the disciples realised the full significance of what Jesus had said and done. When has hindsight helped you to see meaning in what happened to you?

3. There are many ways in which people, the temples of God, are being profaned today. Where do you see that happening? Who are those

trying to remedy the situation?

4. We also want our institutions to reflect the presence of God. Perhaps in this time when aspects of our institutions are crumbling down you can identify with the Jews who were horrified at the suggestion that the Temple would be destroyed. What is it like for you to live in a time when some of the things you had taken for granted are collapsing? Where do you see the hand of God in this?

5. “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit but they can be abused as well as cared for. Much of the time most of us pay little attention to our bodies. We take them for granted. At times we may abuse them. Has caring for your body made any difference to your life?

PRAYER

God all-holy, in every place on earth you gather your people into your presence to proclaim the wonders of your love.

As we celebrate the dedication of the cathedral church of Rome, depend our unity with your faithful throughout the world, and build us up into a house of prayer for all nations.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

Ezekiel offered the suffering people an extraordinary vision of life and healing flowing from God’s presence.

Second reading

1 Cor 3:9-11, 16-17

Who are we really before God? No less than a temple of the Holy Spirit!

Gospel

John 2:13-32

The Temple action was radical—not an attack on *abuse* but on the functioning of the Temple as such.

Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing

Ezek 47:1 Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. 2 Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Ezek 47:3 *Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. 4 Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. 5 Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. 6 He said to me, “Mortal, have you seen this?”*

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. 7 As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. 8 He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. 9 Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. 10 People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. 11 But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. 12 On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for

healing.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The imagery of this great vision is powerful, especially when we remember that the desert, the Tigris and Euphrates, and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The passage has been sensibly abbreviated for the lectionary, while the full text is given here.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It is worth remembering that Ezekiel was both prophet and priest and so his vision of the Temple has special force. The book is in three great division, each marked by a vision of the glory of God (1, 8-11 and 40-48).

- 1-7 Addresses and judgment
- 8-39 God speaks to the exiles
- 40-48 Vision of Israel restores

Within that vision of the kingdom restored, there are again three major divisions.

- 40-43 To the mountains of Israel
- 44-46 The Law of the Temple
- 47-48 Regeneration of the Land

The last two chapters are made up of two unequal parts. The sections are joined by word play in Hebrew: stream is *nahal*, while inheritance is *nahalah*. There is more to the joining than word play, of course.

- 47:1-12 *Streams from the Temple*
- 47:13-48:29 *Tribal divisions*

Finally, the vision in 47:1-12 is closely related to the earlier visions in 40-46, especially 40-42.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a prophetic vision (not an architect’s plan or an engineer’s design) and, in the manner of Ezekiel, it is extravagant.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The visions in Ezekiel 40-42—interesting to read—open with this scene:

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile,

at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me there. He brought me, in visions of God, to the land of Israel, and set me down upon a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south. When he brought me there, a man was there, whose appearance shone like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand; and he was standing in the gateway. The man said to me, “Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel.” (Ezekiel 40:1-4)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 46 (45) takes up the imagery of city, temple, water, life and joy: *The waters of a river give joy to God’s city, the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

THE GOSPEL LINK

Ezekiel, in his exuberant fashion, reminds of us the *purpose* of the Temple, as indeed does Jesus in the Gospel.



Artist’s idealised impression of the temple of Solomon, based on the idealised biblical account.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The water flowing out gives us the literary frame of the vision (vv. 1 and 12). One thinks of the Gihon Spring and Hezekiah’s Tunnel—but this is really an apocalyptic vision.

Verse 2 Ezekiel is taken around the whole temple: from the west, through the north and east, to the south. This verse makes sense in the light of the subsequent verses, with the almost frightening superabundance of water. Given the location and climate of Jerusalem, we are definitely not talking geography here!

Verse 8 Verse 7, with the notice of the trees, leads into this final section. In v. 8, the water brings the possibility of life even into the Dead Sea. The Arabah is that section of the Jordan Rift Valley, running from the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Verse 9 Thus, the writer symbolises the life-giving potential of the renewed Temple: *everything will live where the river goes.*

Verse 12 A kind of tree-lined avenue of water. The river of God triggers not only purification and life in abundance but also healing. In a culture very aware of seasonal availability of food, the picture of fresh fruit every month would certainly strike home. Trees in any case symbolise being in God’s presence, stability and life (Psalm 1 for example). Here Ezekiel’s adds healing—the very thing the wounded exiles stand in need of.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. At times, we all get de-motivated and feel the need of a deeper refreshment. Where have I found my spring of life? A prayer of thanksgiving.
2. At times, we stand in need of healing—physical, relational and spiritual. Can I name my own need of healing? What special areas in my life come to mind? A prayer of placing ourselves God’s healing hand.

PRAYER

Loving and life-giving God, you open your heart to us and lavish on us your gift of life and healing.

Help us not to calculate our response to you but to be equally extravagant in responding to your love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

This week we read shorter letters of the New Testament: Titus and Philemon, as well as 2 and 3 John. Titus is one of the Deuteropauline letters, reflecting a later, less radical social outlook. Philemon comes from Paul’s own hand. It is very personal and even though it might not seem so at first glance, it does undermine slavery.

Monday 10 Nov *St Leo the Great*
Titus 1:1-9

Writing some generations after Paul but in his name, the writer gives a picture of emerging ministries. What do we look for in our pastors?

Tuesday 11 Nov *St Martin of Tours*
Titus 2:1-8, 11-14

We may smile at some of the time-bound advice given here, but behind it all is a vision of life transformed by the Good News of Jesus.

Wednesday 12 Nov *St Josaphat*
Titus 3:1-7

If you listen carefully, you will notice that our reading not only gives examples of how to live in a new way but it also tells us why.

Thursday 13 November
Philemon 1:7-20

A runaway slave sought refuge with Paul and, in the meantime, has become a Christian. Paul entrusts him back to his original master, but no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

Friday 14 Nov *St Lawrence O’Toole*
2 John 1:4-9

The reading combines great warmth and encouragement with a severe warning against heresy, especially that heresy which denies the true humanity of our saviour.

Saturday 15 Nov *St Albert the Great*
3 John 1:5-8

Here we have a little window onto world of early Christianity. Those bearing the Gospel depended on the hospitality and good will of the communities they came to visit. *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.* (Romans 12:13)