

**Lent 3 8<sup>th</sup> March '15 – The Willows**  
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Jesus' journey in the Judean Wilderness is reaching its half way stage; having decided to persevere and not give up he has meditated and prayed about much. He has gained some great new insights and faced some great challenges. He has considered God's law as revealed through Moses and come to see God not as law but as love. God is love. "Father, others have declared, "God is just" I will declare your love." But how will I proclaim your love? How will I reveal your love?"

Jesus has considered "an eye for an eye" and has seen that God's way is not in judgment but in forgiveness: he sees "*love your enemies*" as God's way. And your love Father isn't merely forgiving someone 7 times but, **70 x 7 times!** "Father you forgive... and you forgive those we think you should condemn."

Jesus has considered the breadth of God's love, not only for this people, but for the outcast, the leper, the tax-collector, the Roman occupiers of this holy land, and even God's love for the scum, like the Samaritans. "Truly Father, your love is above and beyond us... for your love excludes none.

Jesus has reflected upon the mercy of God... and has considered that "God's mercy is unfair". *Jesus wrestles with the mercy of God*: and so do we. Mercy is to pardon instead of repaying us as we deserve; mercy offers forgiveness instead of punishment; and Jesus concludes that God is merciful. Do you? *God is not just: God is merciful in forgiving*. Jesus considers his sense of calling... how would he ever be able to reveal the great mercy of God... how would he ever be able to reveal the extent of God's love, or pronounce God's great forgiveness instead of judgment. He wonders when he might ever be able reveal the Fathers way of forgiving them.

Lent is a challenging time where Jesus says: "*You have heard it said... but now I say unto you*";

Lent is a challenging time where you hear of God of old... and are asked to focus upon God of new, as revealed through Jesus;

Lent is a challenging time where you reflect upon the way of law under Moses and Elijah, and the way of grace revealed in Jesus.... Let us listen to him.

In the wilderness Jesus began to know that he would reveal God in ways that would *shock and horrify* those whose view of God was as judgmental, legalistic, and as a God who encouraged stone throwing.

Jesus would reveal God in a new light and some would be *horrified and outraged* at this new vision.

Lent is challenging as we journey with Jesus and where we may not like the new things he says and does in God's name.

Some did not like what Jesus said and did in the cleansing of the Temple. This event as recorded by John and Matthew have affected the Christian Church down through the ages. Some churches, for example, won't sell any items such as cards, cakes, jams, crafts or knitted items in the church and most especially *not in the sanctuary*. Some won't even sell such items in the foyer of a church considering that Jesus in this passage is speaking out against such a practice in God's house. Familiar with this?

One thing to bear in mind is that The Temple referred to here is the Jewish Temple, not a Christian Church. Part of the problem the disciples had *then* and that Christians have today is in discerning what Jewish practice should be out and what Jesus practice should be in? We see this problem appearing in the gospels and in the book of Acts. Peter and Paul fell out in Jerusalem over this!

Jesus was not talking about a local church when he was *cleansing the Jerusalem Temple*. The Temple was a very particular case and Jesus was making a very particular point – a point that he had made several times before against this Temple authority, against these Temple Priests, and most especially against this High Priest, *Caiaphas*. The point here was for them, and has often been taken out of context ever since.

The context here was that of the Temple being utterly corrupt – they had lost all vision of God's purpose and call.

The context here was that of the Temple being hardened to God – they had lost all sensitivity to God’s presence.

The context here was that of the Temple being neither on the side of God, nor on the side of the people – they were self-obsessed.

The Priests were *the blind leading the blind* Jesus said.

They were *a brood of vipers* as John the Baptist had said. Normality of practice for the Temple was *scheming and deceiving...*, and *being without compassion* for the people. They made faith burdensome and unbearable for the people.

There had been previous confrontations between Jesus and the priests sent by High Priest Caiaphas – the Cleansing of the Temple was more than a confrontation about the commercialism of the Temple. This confrontation was about the place of God in their life and faith and practice.

If you read John’s *Cleansing of the Temple* account again (John2: 13-22) you will see that the Temple authority regarded this one way, Christian churches have regarded it in their own way while Jesus himself regards this in broader terms than either of them. Jesus complained as the prophets before had complained that the scales were false, the people were being swindled; the exchange rate from Roman coins into Temple shekels (for the purchase sacrificial animals) was an inflated exchange rate; the sacrificial animals being purchased were also *produced and priced* by the Temple. At every turn the people were being fleeced – but more to the point... being fleeced in God’s name: sanctioned by God’s High Priest. Caiaphas and the Temple priests presented an image of God that was utterly false. This was not what the Father looked like! This is not God’s way.

The God of the Temple was revealed as a corrupt landlord, a heartless profiteer, and a merciless exploiter of a humble people. This looked nothing like the Father. And Jesus was furious.

Jesus cleansed the Temple not so much of thieves, money lenders and corruption, as cleansed it of *their god*. Jesus replaces their image of God with an altogether different image of God. Jesus reveals the unimaginable; he reveals in his words and actions a God who loves and forgives; and who has compassion upon... and who cares for... and who comes among, *and who eats with*. Jesus reveals a God of grace, who offers a pardon that we do not deserve; who loves unconditionally, and... Jesus reveals God’s love and forgiveness for those who do not love him, and even for those who are his enemies. This was unimaginable then... and for many it is unimaginable today.

Even in the harsh Judean Wilderness, in what many have called *a god-forsaken place...* Jesus sees the love of God...

“Your loving presence Father is in the unique desert fragrance;

Your loving presence Father is in the source of fresh water in the desert;

and Your loving presence Father is in the shade of the desert tree.

Your loving presence Father is in the wild flowers that should never be able to grow here.

Your loving presence Father graces this dry wilderness... as you grace the dry and thirsty soul.

O God you are more present than I ever expected.

Loving Father, I will continue to seek you in this place. I will consider how on earth I will ever be able to reveal the wonder of your loving presence... How on earth will I ever be able to reveal you in love and not law; in mercy not condemnation; and in forgiveness not judgment...”

Father God, lead me on in my Lenten journey.

Though tempted to give up, I will persevere a bit further.

Help me persevere Father. Amen.”