

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 11 MARCH 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Exodus 20: 1 - 17; John 2: 13 - 25

“A Good Clean”

The time of Lent, the 40 days preceding Easter, are, for the Church, traditionally a time of reflection. A time of reflection on core values, on what is important in faith, action, and to contemplate the meaning of the life and death of Jesus Christ in our lives, privately, as well as collectively.

It is a time to think about the forces which 2000 years ago brought Jesus to the cross, as well as to contemplate what in our life and times would be likely to do the same thing once again. To consider what in our situation turns us away from God and makes us defy his laws and purposes. To reflect on what keeps us from centering our life around Christ, and a life in surrender to God's will.

It is a time to weigh up what is important in life and what is not. What we absolutely need and what we can well do without. It is a time to sort out our priorities and discard anything that clutters our relationship with God or hampers our ability to live a godly life.

Time to clear up our lives.

In Jesus time a Jewish household just before Pesach would have done just that. Physically as well as mentally.

In the house every last bit of dust would have been removed, every little remnant of superfluous food thrown out before Pesach could be celebrated and a new start made. The cleaning of the house is a preparation that was felt to be very necessary to be able to celebrate the liberation from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of the journey to the promised land. Like they had to clear their houses completely before they could embark on a new journey with God before they were able to leave Egypt, so now do they have to clear everything out again, to make sure there is space in their lives to celebrate Passover and embark on a renewed journey with God in freedom.

It is against this background Jesus does what he does when it is getting close to Pesach. He engages in a massive spring cleaning of his father's house. Any impurity, anything that can hamper worship and may clutter the relationship with God has to go and make room for liberation and a clean start for God and his people.

I don't think it is the sacrificial animals or the money lenders as such Jesus objects to. I don't think this is about barring business from the house of the Lord either, or to get rid of the noise and create a pious and religious atmosphere.

Like spring cleaning is not necessarily about getting rid of things that are wrong but more about creating new and healthier space, I think what Jesus does here has more to do with creating space than with condemnation or passing judgement. It is just that there is too much of it, the bleating of animals and the jingling of cash registers. So much that a barrier has risen between God and his people, between liberating, uncluttered worshipping and the people of God. It's time to get a skip and fill it with whatever is obstructing easy and immediate access to God. It is time for a rigorous clearing out of unnecessary and inessential stuff and a return to the basics of worshipping God in his

temple without all the frills that institutionalised religion has grown over time.

In Lent, traditionally, that is what the Church and the people of the Church are called to do. To clear their private and collective life of what is superfluous and distracting over a period of forty days, to drop the ballast that has attached itself to life and faith but does not really help people to come closer to God. They are forty days given for people of faith to concentrate on what, in the light of Easter, is worth keeping in our lives and what it is that needs clearing out.

Forty days to reflect on what is really important in our relationship with God and what parts of our religiosity could perhaps be discarded because they have become more of a hindrance than a help. Forty days to reflect on what is really important in life and what, perhaps, is not half as important as we made it out to be.

But how do we know the difference? How do we know what is unnecessary ballast and needs clearing out? How do we know the difference between what fits and what does not fit in with a life according to God's will? How do we discern between the things that will enable us to live a godly life and the things that will draw us away from it?

The law is one of the tools that are given to help us make the right choices, to help discern what is at the core of a life with Christ and what is drawing us away from God. Not a straight jacket, but a tool that will help give our life shape and direction.

A law that comes to us in poetic form, in a shape that illustrates the purpose and intent with which it is given. A poem that, when printed in a certain way, will take the form of a chalice, a chalice not dissimilar to the one printed on the front of the order of service, or the one here in front of me on the communion table.

The foot of that chalice represents the basis of a life with God. They are the commandments that refer to our living with others. No false witness, no lying, no coveting. What is of another is sacred and should not be touched, not even in our minds. And we should be reliable in our dealings with others. Respect and faithfulness lying at the heart of an existence within the light of God's covenant.

The stem of the chalice, the part where we hold the chalice, are the commandments that give us a grip on life and keep chaos at bay. They are the commandments that refer to us and our actions. No killing, no adultery, no stealing. They are short, clear and practical. Life is sacred, faithfulness and trust the handles with which you can manage your life in a way that is worthy of God.

These are the things that are essential for anybody wanting to live a Godlike life and wants to make sure they want to keep a grip on it.

The cup itself is formed by the commandments about God. Unlike the other commandments these are explained and supported by reasoning. They talk about the mighty deeds of God, about God's compassion, about creation, the Sabbath and life in the land of God's promises. It is that this is not just any God that gives these commandments, but that it is the God of covenant, the God of liberation, the God of creation, the God of compassion that has given this chalice brimming with fulfilling life and love.

This chalice is given to enable us to drink in life as God wants it to be. This chalice is given to allow us to satisfy our thirst for mercy and grace, to enable us to drink in God's creation and fill ourselves with a life heading towards God's Kingdom. This chalice permits us to drink from the source of salvation, of living water.

The law is there to give us a handle on the frightening and confusing mess life can sometimes be and to draw us from darkness to light, from death to life.

At his table of the Lord we are called to remember the life and death of our Lord who drank from that cup eagerly and without restraint. His obedience to the law, and his commitment to a clean, clear and uncluttered relationship with God an example for what we should focus on in our lives.

So we ask, what keeps us from eagerly drinking from that cup so generously handed to us, what is it that in our time, in our lives, in our community, in our Church has come between us and the abundance that cup has to offer? What keeps us busy and occupied in such a way our relationship with God becomes cluttered and off the mark? Like the temple in Jesus day had become cluttered and the access to God obscured by all sorts of secondary things?

In our time it is probably not the selling of sacrificial animals or the changing of money in the temple grounds that keeps us from God. But there are other things, things that keep us away from God rather than enabling us to come to God, things that hamper our living out the gospel rather than helping it.

Today's reading invites us to give those things some serious thought and make an attempt at doing away with what keeps us from God and a life guided by the principles of his law. To reflect on what we feel are the priorities in our lives and where they need bringing it into line with God's priorities.

Today we are invited to receive the chalice of God's love and covenant as a challenge to ready ourselves to be filled with new purpose and direction. God's purpose and God's direction, formed and filled by the desire to live life true to his Name. Amen.