

South East District
Sunday 8th March 2021 – Lent 3

Simplicity

John 2:13-22 Jesus clears the temple

In our reading for today we heard the story of Jesus clearing the temple. He was filled with righteous anger about the temple, which was meant to be a place of prayer, holiness and devotion to God, being turned into a market, a commercial venture.

We know that as Christians, we are now the temples of the Holy Spirit and it is God's intention that our lives are devoted to honouring him, seeking holiness, loving God and others and seeking to live in a way that shows that love to others. And yet I wonder if Jesus sometimes discovers that our lives have been turned over to self-interest, impurity, idolatry, compromise and greed and if we sometimes get side-tracked by the clutter of the material and secular world in which we live.

I feel that in the light of this reading, God has laid on my heart today to speak about simplicity and to look briefly at ways that we can discover inward and outward simplicity in our lives.

Each time we pray the 'Lord's prayer' we pray that we will trust God for our needs day by day and yet many of us don't have to do that literally.

In our Western society we are not used to having to trust God day by day for provision as we get used to being able to stock up our cupboards and freezers and run down to a 24 hour supermarket whenever we run low on something.

But for most people in our world, this is a luxury that is beyond their wildest dreams. Many people in our world, and even in our own nation, will not know where their next meal is coming from whilst many live in plenty.

In our culture people spend money they don't have on things they don't need – often going into debt to do that. Many people live cluttered lives in cluttered houses and the art of simple living seems to have been lost – the pandemic has forced many of us to think again about the things that are important and we have realised that it is not the material things that most of us miss but things like being with family and friends, shared meals, hugs and gatherings.

As we travel through Lent, it is a good time to reflect on this idea of simplicity and to reflect on whether we are living lives of simplicity or whether our 'temples' are being used for the wrong purposes.

Britain today is a very complex culture. It seems that the days of simplicity are long gone. This fast paced modern way of living can cause us great anxiety and stress. We have more and more pressures put on us and we also put more and more pressure on *ourselves* to keep up with the world around us.

Serenity prayer – Lord grant me the serenity to accept stupid people the way they are, courage to maintain self-control and wisdom to know if I act on what I feel I will go to jail!

So how can we achieve inward simplicity and then how that can be worked out in practical ways?

Inward simplicity

When we start to talk about simplicity we often think straight away about ‘things’ but Richard Foster in his book ‘Freedom of Simplicity’ believes that living a more simple life begins with inward simplicity.

What is ‘inward simplicity’?

Jesus at the centre

It is being in a place where Jesus is completely the centre of our existence. We often sing the song, ‘Jesus be the centre’ but I wonder if we think about what that means in reality?

To have Jesus in the centre of our lives means that any decision we make flows from a desire to honour and obey him.

If Jesus is truly the centre of our lives then he stops being an ‘add on’ to our lives and becomes the whole point and reason for our existence. It means that whatever we do, whether we are gardening, swimming, singing hymns, emptying bins or balancing a multi million pound budget - all can be part of our worship and devotion to our Lord.

When we keep Jesus at the centre of our beings and use him as the reference point for all the decisions we make, then our lives become inwardly more simple and straightforward.

We no longer need to think about whether the outcome of our decision will please this person or that person, or make us look good or popular, or whether we are saying yes because we daren’t say no – suddenly we can be at peace and stop worrying!

A poem by the 5th century Isaac of Stella expresses the idea of inward calm and simplicity based on Jesus being at the centre:

He himself is my contemplation, he is my delight,
Him for his own sake, I seek above me.
From him himself I feed within me.

He is the field in which I labour.
He is the food for which I labour.
He is my cause, he is my effect.
He is my beginning, he is my end without end.
He is for me, eternity.

As we learn to centre more and more on Jesus we will find our batteries being recharged and our lives full of peace and contentment within. We will no longer feel the need to push ahead and keep busy all the time but we will be able to listen for his voice guiding us in the right paths.

Solitude and silence

One way to nurture inward simplicity is to make a conscious effort to set aside times of solitude and silence. Many of us live lives which are full of people and noise and there are times when we have to pull away from that and seek space to just be with God. As someone has said, 'Don't just do something, stand there!'

When we lead busy and stressful lives it is even more important to set aside these times of quiet – Joyce Huggett called them life's lay bys. We don't have to prove anything to God by being busy ALL the time, we can walk closely with God and listen to him and he won't allow us to take on more than we can bear.

This leads us on to how inward simplicity has its outworking practically in our lives.

Outward simplicity

How we spend our time.

However rich or poor we might be, one thing we all have is the same amount of hours in a day – though for some time goes faster than others!

Someone has said, 'I write down all the things I want to remember to do. That way, instead of spending a lot of time trying to remember what it is I wrote down, I spend the time looking for the paper I wrote it on!'

It's easy to fall into one of the two extremes where time is concerned – either to sit back and do nothing and let everyone else do the work or to take on far too much and burn out.

The church has been compared to a football match where 22 people who need a rest are doing all the work while 2000 people who could do with the exercise sit back and watch!

Each of us need to pray and seek the Lord about what he is calling us to do with our time. He may be calling you to lay some things aside but he may also be calling you to take up

some other things. Lockdown – gave people chance to lay things down and reassess what God wants them to take up again.

It may also be that God is challenging you about wasting time.

Googled statistics: Average person in UK watches between 3-4 hours of TV per day. That's 21-28 hours a week – more than a day. Three hours fifteen each day on mobile phone.

The average person taps, swipes and clicks their phone 2617 times a day. Research is showing growing links between use of social media and increase in mental health issues especially amongst younger people.

Imagine what good could be done with all that wasted time. AW Tozer 'When you kill time there is no resurrection!'

They say that you can see what really matters to a person by the way they spend their time. Some people say family is important but the way they spend their time doesn't reflect that. Some say that serving God and getting close to him is important but the way they spend their time shows that isn't true. People have often said to me that they don't have time to read the bible but when I ask about how long they watch TV each evening it seems they do find time for all their favourite programmes and a lot of rubbish. It's a matter of priorities.

How does God want you to spend your time?

What could you do to help support the body of Christ in your locality? Or to reach out to others in our community and world? Do you need to spend more time with your loved ones once lockdown ends? Are you doing too much or not enough? Are you wasting a lot of your time on fruitless activities? Even in lockdown could you do something to support someone you know who is rushed off their feet? Are you making excuses as to why you can't serve God?

Ask him to guide you and you will find a real freedom in doing just the right amount for him. He will strengthen you to take on what he calls you to do and then give you the freedom to say no to anything else.

Too much stuff

Are you a hoarder or a chucker out?

In our society we tend to have much more than we need for our every day living and those *things* can distract us from our walk with the Lord. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, God provided their needs daily in the form of Manna. If they tried to collect too much they found that it had rotted by the next day.

Acquiring more stuff doesn't bring us happiness and contentment – quite the opposite in fact. We have had the privilege of meeting and working with people in some of the poorest

parts of the world and they have so much to teach us about contentment and trust in God for daily needs. It seems the more we have the more miserable and anxious we become.

In our homes we tend to collect many more things than we need that clutter up the place.

The physical clutter can also clutter up our hearts – the more we have, the more there is to worry about and fret over. The more we have the more there is to insure, clean round, find storage for, protect and maintain.

I read a Christian book called 'Too Much Stuff' by Kathryn Porter a few years before we moved overseas and it made me realise that by keeping things 'just in case' I was beginning to put my trust in my belongings instead of in the Lord and that had become an idol in my life. So began the long process of clearing out clutter and getting rid of stuff.

Good advice in Colossians 3 vs 2 'Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.'

When we moved overseas we had to get rid of loads of our belongings as we couldn't take much with us and had to put the rest into storage. Then when we came home we had to leave behind a lot of our belongings which was a good way to get rid of clutter! Since being back in the UK we have gradually collected more 'stuff' but moving house has a way of making you reassess what you need!

We are constantly bombarded with messages telling us to buy more, to update what we have, to replace things before they are worn out – the media would have us believe that the more stuff we acquire the more successful we are but all these acquisitions can cause us more stress and grief, not just in the storage of the stuff but sometimes also in paying for it all!

It's amazing how most of the adverts are for things we don't need!

By getting rid of a lot of our stuff, we can simplify our homes and our lives and also maybe help some people out in the process. By living more simply and not collecting stuff we don't need we may find that we have more money to help others in need and reduce stress in our lives at the same time.

"Live simply so that others may simply live." (Ghandi? Mother Teresa?)

I'd encourage you today to think about how your life could be simpler. You may be very stressed today and know that you need to simplify your life in various ways:

- Putting Jesus at the centre of your whole life instead of a bolt on to your life on Sundays, housegroup nights and maybe for your 10 minute quiet time each day.
- Finding times for solitude and silence in your life.

- Praying about how God wants you to spend your time – finding out what he is calling you to do and doing it with all your heart then saying no to the rest.
- Maybe you haven't been spending your time wisely and you are wasting too much time on pointless pursuits – may feel God is calling you to get involved in the church fellowship – offer your gifts and talents in his service.
- Maybe you are someone who collects too much stuff and need to declutter your home and your heart.
- Maybe you feel that there is something in your life which has taken the place of God for your affection, time and money – it has become an idol for you.
- Maybe you need to stop putting your trust in your material possessions and your own ability to provide for yourself and trust in the Lord to provide your daily needs.
- Maybe you need to live more simply so that others may simply live.

Lord Jesus, as you cleared out the clutter from the temple

Show us areas of our lives that you wish to clear out.

Help us to live in simplicity with you at the centre of all.

Show us what in our lives is keeping us from you,

Help us to put you first, and our stuff and our worries last.

Show us how we can be your hands and feet in this world.

In the name of your son, Jesus Christ

Amen.