

Many of you will remember our first Flower Festival for a number of years which we held back in 2013. Under the friendly direction of Jane West the church was filled with the most gorgeous floral displays while the north aisle was given over to an art show with art by Marion Perkins and others, and some wonderful quilting from Frances Howard and her group. There were cream teas, a concert and a Songs of Praise. I think we were all exhausted by the end but the church looked beautiful. The Festival drew in a lot of visitors and raised thousands for the Friends of St Lawrence.

It was a huge logistical effort which drew in a number of family and friends to help. While we were setting up I noticed that one of the many helpers, who was not a regular member of our congregation, had a worried look on his face. Sure enough he drew me to one side for a conversation. 'This is all wrong, isn't it?' he asked. 'We shouldn't be doing all this in church'. The story he had in mind was our gospel story today, when Jesus drove the traders and money changers out of the Temple. 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market place!' were Jesus' exact words. Were we not committing the same crime by displaying art for sale and taking a proportion of the proceeds for the church?

The Temple forecourts were busy places where pilgrims could meet and where they could buy animals or birds for sacrifice. Here they could turn their tainted Roman coinage, which carried the image of Caesar, into temple coins which bore no such idolatry. All of this was essential if the Jewish laws of sacrifice were to be followed. Some commentators suggest that the traders and money changes were doing nothing corrupt or illegal, just enabling pilgrims to meet their sacred obligations.

Nevertheless my first answer to my questioner sought to establish a difference between our activity and that of the traders in the Temple. We weren't dishonouring the holiness of our church, I argued, but using it for purposes of which God would approve, helping people to appreciate its beauty and contribute financially to its upkeep. He listened but wasn't convinced. To him this was a sacred place, even though he probably only came to one service a year, if that. It shouldn't be sullied by buying and selling. I felt I might have won the argument but that I had somehow lost the moral high ground.

In the Middle Ages, churches were used for a variety of functions such as courtroom, school and library, and hosted meetings, elections, debates, plays and festivities. After the Reformation their secular use gradually became restricted. With the closure of local shops, pubs and Post Offices the church is now the one remaining community building in many places and churches have once again taken on community functions, sharing their space with cafés, shops and arts projects. Correctly administered, the sale of animals and the exchange of currency in the outer forecourts of the Temple enabled devout Jews to observe the Hebrew law. In the same way, flexible and varied use of church buildings can aid community coherence and raise useful funds for the church so that its primary use – as a place of worship – can be maintained and enhanced.

So what was Jesus complaining about? There is a fair amount of contemporary evidence pointing towards corrupt practice, in the Old Testament (Malachi 3.3), the Dead Sea Scrolls and other documents. Pilgrims arriving empty handed were an easy target, just as we are if we have to buy fuel in a motorway service station. But Jesus' criticism went wider than that. The corruption of the priests in Malachi, and of the traders in the Temple, is symbolic of the sin of the whole people. In Matthew, Mark and Luke's account of this incident Jesus quotes Jeremiah: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you make it a den of robbers'. Jeremiah isn't attacking commercial activities inside the Temple, he is saying that the people of Israel who come to worship behave badly outside the Temple, robbing the poor and breaking the commandments of God. Their worship is thus a sham. By disrupting the traders and money changers Jesus is not just exposing malpractice, he is highlighting that much worship of God is insincere.

Today marks the end of Fairtrade fortnight, a time when the many injustices which persist in our international trading system are highlighted. In this case it is the producers and not the consumers who are exploited. Poor farmers in developing countries have no protection from a rampant capitalist market in which large commodity traders and corporations pay the lowest possible price for their goods. The Fair trade movement seeks to offer a fair price to farmers so that they can not only subsist but invest in their farms and grow their prosperity and that of their communities. The distinctive Fair trade logo is easy to spot on the shelves of large supermarkets and of Bovingdon Village Stores and the Co-Op, and even occasionally in Tesco which is not noted for its support of Fair trade. Why not make a conscious effort to buy Fair trade tea,

coffee, sugar, chocolate and other goods when you shop? By doing so you will strike a small blow for some of the poorest communities in the world.

And then, taking a wider perspective, why not think about how we act as consumers in a world where many are poor and in which climate change threatens our long term existence? How can we reduce the carbon footprint of our own homes and lifestyles as well as of our church buildings? How can we shop ethically so that we consume less plastic and avoid using suppliers who use sweated labour? Failure to address these challenges opens us up to Jesus' criticism that we act like robbers in our daily lives and thus cannot worship with sincerity. Our faith isn't just for Sunday, nor is it just about personal piety or smiling at people in the street. It's about recognising God as Lord of all creation and seeing our neighbour not just as the person across the road but the farmer in Africa, the garment worker in Bangladesh and the child in Syria.

May God help us to help them all.