

Lent 3

*A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andre de la Pommeraye Guernsey on 4 March 2018
by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker*

Readings: Exodus 20.1-17; 1 Corinthians 1.18-25 and John 2.13-22

Life is full of surprises. Years ago, I envied what seemed to be the glamorous life of contemporaries who flew around the world. Little did I expect that one day I would find myself frequenting airports and treating planes like slightly exotic buses or trains. But here we are.

Notwithstanding all the heightened security, a great international airport is still a remarkable place to watch humanity, and hope and pray that we can learn to live in harmony with all our difference. An international airport is, in many different ways, the crossroads of the world. All humanity is there, in purposeful harmony; excited and laid back; exhausted and anxious; smartly dressed in western or ethnic dress or, frankly, scruffy; wide awake and drowsy; skin colour in many degrees of black and white.

My first flight was, looking back on it, quite an adventure – flying to Australia in 1979 for our marriage. The nonstop flights we can now take were still unknown. My plane landed first at Bahrain – and I greatly regret not taking more notice of what I found there as it was my first encounter with the Middle East. Transit through Dubai airport nowadays doesn't offer quite the same experience.

The Middle East still has a huge significance as the part of the world where the three great monotheistic religions meet. It is a cause of great sadness that this meeting is now often in conflict rather than the creative coexistence of previous generations – with the ancient indigenous Christians communities under threat in so many places, with pervasive anti-Semitism and an unwillingness of some people to see anything other than intolerance in Islam.

Last Sunday, we were taken back to the Middle East of centuries ago, long before the coming of Jesus, to the call of Abram to be 'the ancestor of a multitude of nations' with the new name, Abraham. Abraham is therefore hailed as a common ancestor in faith for Christians and Jews and Muslims. Which, of course, has a particular and profound significance in the religious and political turmoil of this century.

In all this, the sadness is that Christians and Jews and Muslims share a common ancestor. There are overlaps between our sacred books, even if there are profound differences in the way we define our relationship with the one God whom we worship. For the Jew, the emphasis is on the identity of the Jews as God's chosen people, with their response being framed, in part, by their obedience to the Law given through Moses. For the Muslim, spiritual growth is through obedience. For the Christian, Jesus' life and death and resurrection open up the possibility of our growth as human beings, so that we may be called God's sons and daughters.

Perhaps this is excessive simplification of a highly complex web of history and relationship. The differences between us, and our different understanding of God and how he related to us, cannot be ignored. But the fact remains that we are still 'children of Abraham'. And that requires us to show the most profound respect for each other. If we describe our fellow Christians as our brothers and sisters, then we may well describe Jews and Muslims as our cousins. In the aftermath of the attacks in the UK and other western countries, and in the reactions in the UK to the chaos caused by the show last week, it has been a sign of profound hope to see the response of people united in our common humanity, even if we come from different religions or none.

Today's Old Testament reading is the Ten Commandments, which I read before the penitential prayers at the beginning of the service. This offers us the basic moral code that has profound resonances for Christians and Jews and Muslims. It is a guide to shaping a world where there are fewer triggers for conflict. We might frame some of the commandments differently today, but the basic truth remains: coveting others' possessions is still a major problem that human beings must confront, even if we do not see this problem in terms of our coveting others' livestock or servants. The commandments are uncomfortably clear and unambiguous. They guide our relationship with God, and our relationship with other people. But the commandments are not given to make us feel guilty or, on the other hand, to indicate that keeping them will ensure God's begrudging favour. Rather, the commandments are a sign that God delights in human beings and that a certain way of life is required of us if we are to keep our part of the covenant relationship with God and if we are to flourish.

Today's Gospel reading is striking. John places the cleansing of the Temple in chapter 2, at the beginning of Jesus' public life and ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this incident at the end, where it comes just after Jesus' triumphal, Palm Sunday, entrance to Jerusalem and provides the beginning of the major conflict that results in Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. John moves the incident to the beginning of Jesus' ministry because he sees the whole of the story of Jesus as a dramatic conflict between Jesus, the Word, who is also the Light that has come into the world, and the 'powers of darkness' symbolised by 'the Jews'.

While those who saw Jesus' actions might have thought that Jesus was insane when he cleared the Temple, he was actually acting out a simple visual parable. The animals were on sale to be used as sacrifices. By clearing them out and standing in their place, Jesus was saying, 'I am the true sacrifice that replaces this imperfect and abused sacrificial system.' His statement about the Temple follows the same pattern. So Jesus explains that the Temple's function, as the focus of God's relationship with his people, will be replaced and surpassed by and in himself.

A crucified God, says Paul, may be offensive to Jews and ridiculous to Greeks. But if God had refused to allow this, there would never be any possibility of a point of contact between him and us, and no outpouring of God's grace that makes us right with him.

In the conflict between light and darkness, which we find in each of the readings today, the darkness of evil will not master the light of love which we see in the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus.