

“Zeal for your house”

A few weeks ago your rector and I were showing our respective ages by recalling the days of the yellow pages, when businesses would tailor their names to get either at the very beginning or the very end of the listing.

AAA Plumbing

Aaron Aardvark Electricals

ZZZ bedding

Now imagine you were a church in those times. What name might you choose to get at the beginning or end of the alphabet?

A offers plenty of possibilities.

Awesome church for the enthusiasts.

Australia Church for the ambitious.

All Saints for the more liturgically minded.

But when you get to z the pickings are slim.

Zombie church is a bit niche.

Zen church risks inter-religious confusion.

But here’s one – zealous church.

What would you think if that was the name, or even a common description of your church? How would you feel if people were saying “there a zealous bunch down there at St Paul’s!”

I’d reckon we’d feel just a little uncomfortable.

Because so often zeal and zealotry are to be associated with fanaticism and extremism.

The zealot is the person whose faith is more like the foot on the accelerator than the hand on the steering wheel.

In other words faith doesn’t seem to change the direction that they’re going; it just increases the speed with which they’re going there and woe betide anyone who gets in the way.

And if that is true at the individual level how much more so when we form groups. Faith then becomes yet another reason to defend our group and its interests against those on the outside.

Zeal, especially about matters of faith, seems more like a curse than a blessing.

And there’s some biblical justification for our concerns. The original zealot is Phinehas, who we meet in Numbers 25 where he puts the shenanigans of an Israelite and a Midianite to an end by

impaling them both on his spear – hardly something I encourage in Parish life. In the first century the zealots were a Jewish group who wanted to end Roman rule by military force – and it’s pretty clear Jesus wasn’t on board with their program. Then in Romans 10:2 Paul warns against those who have zeal for God, but without knowledge.

So what are to make then of the quote at the heart of today’s gospel reading – “Zeal for your house will consume me”. It comes from Psalm 68 and we’re told Jesus disciples remembered it – presumably because it captured something essential about who he was.

So is Jesus a zealot – and what does that mean?

The first place to look to an answer to that question might be in the actions which this passage recounts. The so-called cleansing of the temple is recorded in all four gospels, albeit in slightly different ways.

Clearly something has Jesus very upset. When he comes to the temple and finds it turned into a marketplace he makes a whip and drives out the merchants and their produce and overturns the tables of the moneychangers.

That’s zealous.

But that’s not the end or even the climax of the story.

And we get a hint even in that quote.

In the OT the passage is in the past tense – “zeal for your house has consumed me”.

But John has put in the future tense – “zeal for your house will consume me”.

And then there are the enigmatic words:

¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”.

Of course his hearers are puzzled – they know the temple has been under construction for longer than some of them have been alive ...

Then we, the readers, are let in on a secret:

But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

Even at this point Jesus is re-configuring our understanding of the temple, not just by giving an existing structure a spruce up but by re-locating its very existence. Now his body will be the place where God and humanity meet.

And it will be zeal for that temple, that house, and all it represents which will consume him – even to the point of giving his body over to death.

Because here is the wonder and glory of the Christian gospel – in order for Christ’s body to the place where a holy God and a broken humanity join in fellowship that body must first be given over to broken-ness.

Here is the zeal, the passion of Christ, here is what eats him up – a radical commitment for the good of others expressed in self-giving love.

When Jesus feeds a hungry crowd in the wilderness – we see his zeal.

When Jesus kneels and washes the dirty feet of his disciples – we see his zeal.

When Jesus bows his head and says – it is finished – we see his zeal.

And when the Spirit of the Risen Jesus continues to draw an ever-widening circle of people – even eunuchs – then we see His zeal.

Because it is then we see the fulfilment of Isaiah’s vision as the house of God becomes a house of prayer for all nations as the people of those nations call on God in and through the Lord Jesus.

And if we are to be zealous for Christ we must be zealous for that cause.

But we need to be zealous as he was.

Not by dominating or excluding but by loving and serving and welcoming.

That must be our passion, as it was and is His.

After this morning’s service we will move outside for the planting of an Oak tree by His Excellency the Governor General.

When I think of oaks I’m reminded of these words written in 1791 by the great hymn writer John Newton to the Chaplain of the First Fleet The Reverend Richard Johnson.

“You are sent to New Holland not to sow salad seeds, but to plant acorns, and your labour will not be lost, though the first appearance may be very small and the progress very slow. You are, I trust, planting for the next century. I have good hope that your oaks will spring up and flourish and spread among the islands and nations of the southern seas.”

What inspires a man like Richard Johnson to leave Yorkshire and travel across the world in a leaky boat?

What inspires women and men to go into prisons and schools bearing the good news?

What inspired our forebears to erect this building 80 years ago, even as the clouds of war were gathering?

I trust it was a holy, generous and expansive zeal for the cause and person of Jesus Christ.

May that same zeal inspire us, so that with God’s help we continue to serve the true house of God, who shall endure long after even this beautiful building has passed away. AMEN