

It cannot have escaped the notice of anybody here that we live in turbulent times. The hyper-observant or perennially paranoid will have noted the sickly shoots of chaos sprouting a long time ago; for most of us the first inkling perhaps that we were facing a bumpy ride in the future was a referendum result nobody expected shortly followed by the White House turning a strange shade of orange. As I was writing this sermon the news was full of frightened angry people who couldn't get a test for coronavirus anytime soon or anywhere near despite us being nine months into a pandemic which has given us everything from toilet roll shortages to national lockdown; schools and churches closed, face coverings and furlough. Whatever your default psychological constitution, whether you take it as it comes or forever fret: no denying, the world outside is suddenly as calm as the surface of a tank of starving piranhas. If you read the panic-stricken Daily Mail, you will of course have known this for years and are no doubt already sharing your front room with a nuclear fall-out shelter's worth of tinned food and a shotgun. Turbulent times. And as toilet rolls,

tests and trust runs out, there is one question in every mind and on everyones lips. Who, just who is to blame?

We don't have to go very far before we are offered an answer: open a newspaper, turn on a radio or a tv, listen to conversations in the street, in the supermarket or the pub, if you can find one still in business. It is obviously the fault of young people. Or people on beaches. Or your neighbours having that party last weekend. Or the older people for voting in the people who are currently claiming to be in charge while for all the world looking like someone who's just spent the last hour on a rollercoaster trying to drink a barrel of chocolate milk shake. Not pretty. But then patently it is the Chinese who are to blame- or is it perhaps the Italians? The Spanish? The French? No surely Jeremy Corbyn is to blame, Matt Hancock is to blame, Boris Johnson is to blame, Margaret Thatcher is to blame. Actually it probably is her fault: most things usually are. Everybody has an opinion; everybody knows where the problem lies. Some may in fact know, most don't, but the thing that we all

know, the most important thing, that we all know is this: categorically, rock-solid immovably, unshakeable certainly, 'it is not my fault'. Nothing, ever is.

The first day at school is a day in life most people can remember. While we can still remember anything, we will remember that most seminal of childhood events. It might be the tears of parting at the school gates; it might be the excitement of all things new; it might be the pride of having finally come of age and joined big brothers and sisters: always something at the start of the very first start of term to remember. Me, I remember my first day at school: I remember being blamed by the classmate sitting next to me for his impressive installation artwork created in the medium of crayon and desk. To add insult to injury and salt into the wounds the teacher believed him and not me. The very first thing I learned at school is that most of us learn to play pass the buck before we even know how to play pass the parcel. And as surely as a broadcaster follows bad news

“It’s not my fault” is followed by “Who is to blame?”  
Somebody, after all, is always to blame.

At one level, we respond instinctively to what we heard in this morning’s gospel, generally known as the ‘Cleansing of the Temple’. Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem and finds not the busy thrum of worship but the relentless chink of commerce. And so he overturns the tables of the money changers and animal sellers and drives the nascent Thatcherite entrepreneurs out of the House of God. It’s a ‘spot the bad guys’ plot Marvel Comics would be happy with. The bad guys have been identified, blame has been apportioned, right triumphs. Jesus, action hero, finds the baddies and metes out some rough ‘n’ ready justice. The moral of the story? Seek out some wrongdoers and give them what for. *Now he’s talking our language!*

As a culture and even as church we’re rather good at this particular game of hide and seek, especially if the wrongdoers we are seeking are those people in the building

down the road - you know, that lot with their strange ideas and their bizarre habits. The blame game is ever popular, the rules are easy, what after all, is faith, but the knowledge that you are right and someone else is wrong, what is faith in action but finding who is to blame and letting them know? We've all heard the street-corner evangelist shouting at the streams of sinful shoppers, we've seen the campaigners queuing to condemn a play or a musical or a book that falls foul of religious rules, real or imagined, we've all felt outrage at the muddying of faith and the abuse of God's house by that lot: each instance, to its enactors a tiny self-righteous replay of Our Saviour driving the money changers out of his Father's house. There lies human happiness: we can be content, we have found someone to blame.

There are many things that we characteristically do just as easily as passing the buck and apportioning the blame, not the least of which is missing the point. It's written into our genes. We are never more contented than when we can

concentrate on an inconsequential detail, fuss and coo over the bath water while the baby hurries away down the drain. And we usually miss the point with this gospel story.

So, who, we want to know, although we already know the answer, is to blame? Nobody. That is asking the wrong question. The cleansing of the Temple is not about the abhorrent money changers (and despite the evergreen misconception it is changers not lenders). This gospel is not about that prime religious impulse to find the wrongdoer. The Temple is cleansed by Jesus, not because it is unclean, but because it is the Temple. What is important in this tale is not that the Temple has money changers and animal sellers: all these are in fact absolutely necessary to ensure that the worship of the Temple can proceed as it should, a bit like St Mary's and the Parish Support Fund. Moneychangers and animal dealers were absolutely necessary 33 years earlier at the Presentation of the infant Jesus, when Mary and Joseph came to the Temple accompanied by turtles doves for sacrifice. Nothing has changed. The scandal is not that the

people of Jerusalem are changing money, buying animals and sacrificing them in the holiest place on earth: the scandal is that they are not praying. 'My house shall be a house of prayer' and it patently isn't. This is the scandal. It is a scandal that is so difficult to see, because that glittering, iridescent bath water of blame grabs our attention far more readily than the pitiful baby. We can hear the account of the cleansing of the Temple and we immediately want to know 'whose fault is it? Who is to blame?' The answer is readily to hand, but to reach for that answer is just to do what we do well and to miss the point. This is a story of a warning for people who are forgetting how to pray, a warning for people who are forgetting to pray at all. That, is a serious business.

It is easily done. We find that we have something better to do than to say our prayers, we have something more pressing for our time than making the mass. The unimportant glitters and shimmers as only the inessential must and our attention wanders. God is, after all, always

there; it's not our fault if modern life makes no room for our prayer life; the Church is always there when we really need it, until the time when it no longer is. And then one day we dimly remember the house that we built, our house of prayer, and when we open the creaking door we find that God has left the building.

There will come a time when there will be nobody to take the rap for our mistakes, nobody to shoulder the blame, no convenient scapegoat, nobody there waiting with an off-the-shelf excuse for our neglect. We will stand before the supreme magistrate and there will be only one thing we can say, only one plea to be entered before the judge: 'you died for me'. No amount of pointing the finger will help on that day, no proud history of truffling out miscreants will prepare for that moment. If there is anything that can possibly make a difference it is that one thing that was so glaringly absent from the Temple, and it is prayer. Is your house in order? Is *that* house lived in? When was the last time *you* looked.