

The Cleansing of the Temple – Matthew chapter 2 verse 12-13

The Temple of Jerusalem in Jesus' time consisted of a relatively small temple building and four large courtyards. Most worship (sacrifices, prayer) took place in the open air in one of the courtyards.

The name of the courtyard tells you who could go there. The innermost courtyard is the court of the priests where the sacrifices took place. Next to this is the court of the Israelites – this is where the Jewish men worshipped. There was only a low wall between the two courtyards, so the men could watch what the priests were doing.

Behind the courtyard for the Jewish men was another courtyard for the Jewish women. Because women were seen as less important than men they were kept further back from the main temple building and a high wall divided them from the altar, but they could still pray here.

The largest courtyard of all was the Court of the Gentiles. A gentile is anyone who is not a Jew. Many foreigners found the Jewish worship of one God attractive and they could visit the temple and pray in this outer courtyard. It was also the place where famous Jewish teachers held classes – a kind of university. Unfortunately the courtyard was no longer a good place to pray and think, because the authorities had turned it into an outdoor market. The animals and birds which were going to be used in the sacrifices were on sale there. There were also a number of moneychangers – this is because a special coinage was used only in the Temple, so visitors had to change their money on the way in to buy their animals for sacrifice or to pay for offerings. The moneychangers were notorious for overcharging people – and this is why Jesus calls the place a “den of thieves”.

Jesus is enraged because visiting gentiles are being prevented from worshipping God, and the whole focus of the temple now seems to be on making money and cheating the poor. It would be rather like going into Ely Cathedral on a Sunday and finding that worship was still going on out of sight at the East End, but that a farm and all the local market traders had set up in the Nave!

