

This very familiar gospel passage read to day has a lot to say to us about living in our current consumer society.

So I want to explore a little of what it means to live within a consumer society, without becoming consumerist in the way we live our lives.

I was in Sainsbury's the other evening after a hard day's work, queuing at checkout number 4 in Clapham, thinking about what I was going to say today, when I became aware of a dispute growing between a customer and a dejected looking checkout assistant at till number 3.

The customer was becoming increasingly vocal and angry And at one point she shouted "I did not choose to buy Sainsbury's deluxe Marmalade at £1.56 but chose it at its labelled price of £1.23 and I am not paying a penny more.

This strange comment got me thinking about Christ's emphatic statement in John's gospel "You did not choose me, I chose you."

In the gospel passage we see Jesus getting very angry about the trading that was going on in the temple for acceptable sacrificial animals.

He says these very strong words "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market place" This is qualified by a quotation from the Old Testament "Zeal for your house will consume me"

Following through the implications of these statements, we can interpret an argument that there are rival world-views hitting head on in this scene. The view of people living by a focus of market consumption as a way of life, versus a new order of living as the new community focused on the love of God. The contrast is great between these two choices. One is a form of idolatry where God is replaced by individualistic choice making and the other to do with the beginning of the Church as the sign of the Kingdom. This

connection is made in the text when it says, “He was speaking of the temple of his body”.

Personally I am convinced by the argument that a lot of Jesus’ anger was concerned with the exclusion of the poor. That the redeeming of sin before God was a matter of the ability to buy a sacrificial animal which people made money out of. This is an outrageous abuse of God’s redemptive purposes.

Now it is dangerous to think that living and participating in our consumer society is therefore sinful, this is clearly not true. This is the mistake that the Pharisees made by removing themselves from contemporary society to keep pure and not be sinful. Similarly many Christians and Churches today have withdrawn from society to avoid being sinful in participating in a consumer society, but this is not the way of Christ.

We are left with the question, how do we follow the way of Christ, an incarnational calling to participate in a consumer society, without becoming blinded by becoming consumerist in how we live, particularly in the way this excludes the participation of the poor?

So what does it mean to be living in a Consumer Society?

Where previous generations found their identity in what they produced, we now find our identity in what we consume. We have moved from a society that shaped its members primarily as producers – those who believed in progress and in producing something that contributed to the better life - that was certain to come through education and hard work – to a society that shapes its members first and foremost by the need to play the role of the consumer.

The core value of society has moved from ‘progress’ to ‘choice’ – the absolute right of freedom to choose. ‘Choice lies at the heart of consumerism, both as its emblem and as its core value. In this society everyone becomes a consumer.

It is important to distinguish between 'consumer society' and the ideology of 'consumerism'. In one sense there is no alternative to a consumer society. That is what we are, and that is where we must be church and embody the gospel. To fulfil our Lord's Prayer for the Church (John 17:15-18) we are called to be church 'in' consumer society, but we dare not let ourselves be 'of' consumerism.

At its worst, consumerism is extremely selfish, excludes the poor and creates a self-indulgent society where everyone has rights and no one take any responsibility.

People who are consumerist define themselves not with any depth or connection with deep belief – but by the cars they drive, the clothing labels they wear, and the music they listen to. People who are consumerist constantly struggle with who and what they are, which change as fashions and habits change. This is a society of increased stress and lack of stable identity, which is not good for their mental health or for society.

So how do Christians live in a consumer society but not of a consumerism? The answer here lies in the gospel text when it says, 'Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body'.

The purpose of Jesus was not to just bring a new message but to form a new community. The Church. A new community that at its creation was immediately persecuted because it threatened the status quo. It included the socially excluded and the poor. It was a spiritual community that sought to live out a corrective to the wrongs of contemporary society and other structures through love and social justice born out a conviction of the evolving Kingdom of God.

It is a form of church that we participate in not for what we get out of it as a form of selfish consumer choice, but because we believe it to be true and because true freedom is found in giving and taking, participating in people's lives through the love of God. In the sharing of bread and wine, in communion and eucharist. In this

way the new community through the power of God can be transformative of society.

As St Paul wrote about this new community

“You yourselves are our letter.... Known and read by everyone...a letter from Christ written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts.”  
Corinthians 3:2-3

So by living in community, by offering love and hospitality, by living out our faith based on the ancient narrative of God the Trinity, we find true liberation of identity. All these things are corrective to a consumerist way of life. Finally, we need to hold onto the need for us to live and be church afresh to this current generation. That we be open to change and ways of being church that allow others to belong. As the ‘declaration of Assent’ in the Church of England Ordinal says

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim **afresh** in each generation

Our calling is to live out this way of being Church in a society that is increasingly losing a sense of God by blindly following consumerism as the solution to all problems. May we be a form of church that lives out a corrective afresh form of faith to such a society.

In the name of Christ...Amen.