

Trinity Baptist Church - Sunday 16th January 2022

Andy Banks - Mark 11:12-25(26)

Jesus' prophetic acts concerning Israel and the temple

I want to return to our series in Mark's Gospel that we were following before I was off sick – although this will actually be the only sermon in the series in January! Today we're looking at Mark 11:12-25.

[Read Mark 11:12-25]

12The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs.

14Then he said to the tree, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard him say it.

15On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it "a den of robbers".'

18The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig-tree withered from the roots. 21Peter remembered and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, look! The fig-tree you cursed has withered!'

22'Have faith in God,' Jesus answered. 23'Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

24Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.'

[Pray]

Last week I introduced our text for the year: 1 Peter 1:15-16: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" There are obvious parallels with the second question we've been asking in our Mark series: "What difference does who Jesus is make to your life?" But actually, there is just as strong a connection to Jesus' own question, which has been our *primary* focus through this series, "Who do *you* say I am?" For the only foundation for any holiness on our part is a true acceptance of Jesus' identity (God incarnate) and mission (to bestow upon us his holiness by his substitutionary death and resurrection).

1) The cursing of the fig tree: an acted out parable for Israel

The opposite is also true. It was his own people's unwillingness to accept his identity, coupled with their unholy actions, that precipitated the events of today's passage. "But," you may well ask, "what does Jesus' identity and Israel's rejection of it have to do with his cursing of a *fig* tree which encloses the account of the cleansing of the temple?" It seems such a pointless, even barbaric, thing to do. After all, the tree couldn't be produce figs out of season, just because Jesus was hungry. Hence, one commentator dismisses this as "a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper."

Before I answer that, some background is helpful. Fig trees are very common in Israel. Typically, they sprout leaves in early Spring, followed by two harvests, in early Summer and early Autumn. After the second harvest, when the leaves drop off, they produce buds, which remain undeveloped until the Spring, when they swell into green knops, which in turn develop into the first figs. The knops themselves are actually edible, if not particularly pleasant and, given the time of year, Jesus may have been seeking these knops, rather than the fully ripened fruit. If so, then perhaps, despite its leaves suggesting good health, this tree had not produced the anticipated knops, either because the buds had not swelled, or because there were no buds at all. Perhaps it was, in fact, deficient.

But Mark's explanation for the tree's unfruitfulness – "it was not the season for figs" – suggests that Jesus' cursing of this tree actually had little to do with the *tree* at all. Rather, it was as a dramatised parable. Further, Mark intended this

parable to be the lens through which to interpret Jesus' cleansing of the temple, since he carefully kept that event imbedded *within* the account of this nature miracle.

That view is reinforced by Scripture. For Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk all use the imagery of a fig tree to prophesy coming judgement, both to literally describe the consequent suffering that would befall the nation, and to parabolically picture the judgement itself. For example, God warns in Hosea 2:12, literally:

*"I will ruin her vines and her **fig-trees**,
which she said were her pay from her lovers;
I will make them a thicket,
and wild animals will devour them."*

While in Micah 7:1-2, God compares finding no righteousness among his people to the finding no fruit on the grape-vine or fig tree:

*"What misery is mine!
I am like one who gathers summer fruit
at the gleaning of the vineyard;
there is no cluster of grapes to eat,
none of the **early figs** that I crave.
The faithful have been swept from the land;
not one upright person remains."*

And in Jeremiah 29:17, figs become the symbol of judgement itself: *"Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them **like figs** that are so bad they cannot be eaten."*

Further, Jesus himself had already prophesied judgement on the nation through a similar parable: Luke 13:6-9:

*"A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'
'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*

Jesus' actions, then, were not in any way, "miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper," but rather a planned, dramatised parable of coming judgement. The fig tree was Israel. They had all the outward signs of spiritual life displayed in their religious observances, as the fig tree had all the signs of life displayed in its leaves. But they were producing none of the fruit God sought in their behaviour any more than the fig tree had any edible fruit. Since they had rejected their Messiah, and were producing no righteous fruit, judgement was imminent, which came to pass in AD70, when the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem and the temple.

But, since this sign was given only to the disciples, it is less of a warning and more of a simple statement of what was going to happen, so that they should not be surprised or concerned when it did happen. Because of Jesus' own authority, as God in human flesh, his curse brought instant withering to the tree, so that the full parabolic effect of his actions would be understood by his disciples. The curse was deserved, not because the *tree* was bare, but because it represented a *nation* which was bare of righteousness. Though, Jesus also used it as an object lesson in prayer for his disciples.

2) The cleansing of the temple

After cursing the tree, Jesus proceeded into the temple itself, where he had observed all the buying and selling that was taking place the previous day. Mark alone records the significant detail that he did not act immediately but slept on his response first. Thus, his anger at the abuse of his Father's house, though very real, was again expressed in a controlled and planned way. Perhaps we can learn something here. This, too, is a prophetic act of judgement, noteworthy for the act of cleansing itself, the prophetic quotes Jesus gave to explain his actions, and the reaction of the Jewish leaders to his prophecy.

The temple was a truly magnificent and huge complex – covering some 35 acres! It was, without doubt, the Jews' pride and joy, not just because of its grandeur, but even more because it represented to them their special privilege of being God's chosen people. There was but one court open to non-Jews – the outer Court of the Gentiles. And it was here that the trading took place.

They were trading in things that were essential for worship at the temple. The yearly temple tax could only be paid with the special half-shekel from Tyre, which the moneychangers exchanged for ordinary money, but charged a commission of 4-8% for doing so. Likewise, since sacrifices offered at the temple had to be blemish-free, and since many people travelled to Jerusalem at Passover time from a long way away, certified or approved animals were sold in the temple courts for worshippers to offer. However, the priests made such profits out of these transactions that a number of ancient Jewish writers accuse them of robbing the poor to line their own pockets.

One interpretation, then, of Jesus' actions was that he was pronouncing judgement upon this *exploitation* of the poor. That is certainly a significant aspect of Jeremiah 7, from which Jesus quotes, the words "a den of robbers": "If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other *justly*, if you do not *oppress* the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever" (Jeremiah 7:5-7). Injustice was so incompatible with the Holy God and his house that it must be judged and punished.

But Jesus' other quote, from Isaiah 56:7, may suggest another, complimentary, but perhaps even stronger, reason for his anger and prophetic action. For Isaiah 56 primarily conveys God's heart that no-one should feel excluded from worshipping him if they come in sincerity, regardless of their nationality:

"3Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say,
 'The LORD will surely exclude me from his people' ...
 6... foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
 to minister to him,
 to love the name of the LORD,
 and to be his servants,
 all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
 and who hold fast to my covenant –
 7these I will bring to my holy mountain
 and give them joy in my house of prayer.
 Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house will be called
 a house of prayer for *all* nations.'" (Isaiah 56:3,6-7).

God's desire for his temple was that it would be a central focus to which *all* nations would come and worship him. Yet, the one place to which the Jewish priests allowed people from other nations access was filled with the sounds of competing commerce – and *exploitative* commerce too. Rather than giving the nations a place, it said to them, "You don't matter, you are lesser people, your worship is unimportant." God's holy place of worship was being defiled by the unholiness of racial prejudice, and this must also be judged. If the priests continued to violate God's purposes for his temple, then the temple itself must be destroyed again. For sin is incompatible with God's holiness.

There is an irony here, in that most Jews expected a Messiah king who would free them from the oppression of unclean foreigners – notably the Romans. But Jesus declared judgement upon the *Jewish* leaders for excluding these same foreigners, judgement which the foreign Romans executed in AD70! Why? Because the Israelites refused to accept God's appointed Messiah, Jesus, and because their behaviour was so incompatible with a claimed worship of God.

Yet, even when they heard Jesus quoting Scriptures of judgement (the meaning of which they surely understood), instead of heeding his words, they sought to kill the messenger. They were afraid of his popularity because he called out their sin, and they cared more about their money and status than about truly following God's ways.

But, although this dramatised warning was specifically given to Israel, and particularly to her leaders, there are principles that we would do well to apply to ourselves. The Church is called to Christlikeness or holiness. God's priorities should be our priorities both individually and corporately. So, the Church must guard against a religion that is merely outward and doesn't transform hearts or behaviour. The Church must be a place where people from all nations feel at home and able to worship freely. We must stand against injustice and oppression, wherever it occurs. We must guard against a love of money, which is a root of all kinds of evil, and focus instead on growing in love, compassion, forgiveness and holiness. We must trust in times of opposition, or when unholiness increases in the world around us, that God remains sovereign and will make all things right. And we must tap into the incredible resources made available to us through prayer. Then we will remain God's holy people and run no risk of facing judgement. Our belief that Jesus is God the Son, who died to reconcile us to himself, should radically affect *every* aspect of how we live. Amen?

[Pray]