

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

SESSION 13: CHAPTER 11: 1-25 "PALM SUNDAY & WHAT HAPPENED NEXT"

Read Mark 11: 1 - 10.

QUESTIONS:

- 1.(a). Why did Jesus sent the disciples on ahead?
- (b). How was Jesus able to give them such precise instructions?
- (c). Why did Jesus ride a donkey (cf. Zech 9:9)?
- (d). In what ways is the significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem reinforced?



NB The point Mark wants to make, however, is clear. From chapter 8 onwards the disciples have believed that Jesus is the true and rightful King of the Jews, on his way to the capital city to be hailed as such. This is the moment for his royal reception.

The shout of the crowd brings this out exactly. 'Hosanna' is a Hebrew word which mixes exuberant praise to God with the prayer that God will save his people, and do so right away. The beginning and end of their cheerful chant is taken from Psalm 118:25–26, which is itself all about going up to Jerusalem and the Temple. The sentence that follows means, literally, 'Blessed is the one who comes'; but in Hebrew and Aramaic that's the way you say 'welcome'. In the middle of the chant they have inserted the dangerous prayer: Welcome to the kingdom of our father David! This is what the scene is all about - as Mark's readers have known for some while, and as we saw in the shout of blind Bartimaeus in 10:47–48.



N T WRIGHT

Read Mark 11: 11 - 25.

Fig trees, an inexpensive and popular source of food in Israel, require three years from the time they are planted until they bear fruit. Each tree yields a great amount of fruit, which is harvested twice a year in late spring and early autumn. This incident occurred early in the spring fig season when the leaves were beginning to bud. The figs normally grow as the leaves fill out, but this tree, though full of leaves had no figs;



thus, it would not have given fruit that year. The tree looked promising, but offered no fruit.

- 2.(a). Why do you suppose Mark has sandwiched this account of Jesus' cleaning out of the temple within that of the cursing of the fig tree?
- (b). Why do you think Jesus did not act when he first went into the Temple?
- (c). Why do you think Jesus is so angry with what is taking place in the Temple?
- (d). Is there such a thing as "righteous indignation"? How can we differentiate it from "plain" anger?

NB By the way he's told the story, though, Mark makes it clear that the fig tree is a dramatic acted parable, indicating the meaning of what Jesus was going to do in the Temple.

By itself, the Temple incident is ambiguous. Many people have thought that Jesus was simply protesting against commercialization. On this view, he only intended to clean up the Temple—to stop all this non-religious activity, and leave it as a place for pure prayer and worship. (That's a suspiciously modern attitude; keeping religion and economic life strictly separate has had fairly devastating consequences, not least in the Two-Thirds World.) But Mark makes it clear, by the placing of the Temple incident within the two halves of the fig tree story, that he sees Jesus' actions as, again, a dramatic acted parable of judgment. This was Jesus' way of announcing God's condemnation of the Temple itself and all that it had become in the national life of Israel.

The key comes in the biblical quotations that sum up Jesus' charge against the Temple. Harking back to the old prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus is reminding his hearers that the Temple had always been an ambiguous thing. Right from the time it was built and dedicated by Solomon, it was clear that it could never in fact be the full and final dwelling-place of the true God (1 Kings 8:27). Although God had promised to bless Israel through the Temple, if Israel began to take it for granted, to use the Temple and the promises attached to it as an excuse for immoral and unjust behaviour, then the Temple itself could and would be judged. That's what the early chapters of Jeremiah are all about, including the quotation that comes here: God's house has become a brigand's cave. N T WRIGHT

NB Jesus' odd cursing of a fig tree - the only miracle that brings death and not life - becomes an enacted parable. Jeremiah's outburst against the temple provides the backdrop for understanding it. God forbids the prophet to make any intercession for the people (Jer. 7:16) and then says that his "wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched" (7:20). The parable of the tenants of the vineyard makes the same point: The tenants [of the temple] have borne no fruit to give to the owner and are subsequently destroyed. ARNOLD

- 3.(a). Why did the authorities seek a way to destroy Jesus?
What held them back?
- (b). Do you think that "Cursing the Fig tree" was fair?
- (c). What teaching does Jesus offer from it?
What teaching about prayer can be found in vs. 23-25?

NB Jesus may have had a more specific meaning in v.23. As he spoke these words the Mount of Olives would have been in view. Zechariah prophesied that the Lord will one day return to the Mount of Olives to judge his people and to establish his kingdom. As his feet touch the Mount, it will move out of the way (Zechariah 14:4)



- 4.(a). If praying to move mountains is praying for the day of God's judgement, why is it important to pray with the attitude Jesus describes in v.25?
- (b). Can you pray for anything v.24?

NB In encouraging his followers to pray with confident boldness for the present order to be replaced by God's new order, Jesus is quite clear that there can be no personal malice or aggression involved in such work. Even at the moment when Jesus is denouncing the system that has so deeply corrupted God's intention for Israel, his final word is the stern command to forgive. Perhaps only those who have learned what that means will be in a position to act with Jesus' authority against the injustice and wickedness of our own day. WRIGHT

- (c) Why is it often difficult for us to hold together a deep desire for God's will to be done on earth and a spirit of peace and forgiveness?