

## JOURNEYING THROUGH HOLY WEEK TO EASTER WITH MARK'S GOSPEL

**MONDAY 29 March 2021**

Focus your attention on God and become aware again of God's presence with you, and of joining with other worshippers (as in the Introduction to this series).

Thank God for bringing you safely to this day. Ask God to inspire you.

Then read this passage, paying attention to it as you do. What catches your imagination? What puzzles you? How does it make you feel?

**Mark 11:12-25; 12:38-13:2 (NRSV)**

<sup>12</sup> On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. <sup>13</sup> Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup> He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

<sup>15</sup> Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; <sup>16</sup> and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. <sup>17</sup> He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?'

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

<sup>18</sup> And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. <sup>19</sup> And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

<sup>20</sup> In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>21</sup> Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

<sup>25</sup> 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

... ..

<sup>12</sup><sup>38</sup> As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! <sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

<sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup> Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup> For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

13<sup>1</sup> As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' <sup>2</sup>Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

### **Reflection**

In yesterday's passage, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, he went into the Temple and inspected it, and then retired for the night. The next day begins with him inspecting a fig tree. He seems to expect it to provide him with figs, even when Mark explicitly tells us it was not the season for figs. What is more, he proceeds to condemn it for not providing them. How unreasonable! Who does he think he is?

There is that question again: who is he? Does it make any difference to remember that in the stories of the Garden of Eden in Genesis, before what we call 'the Fall', there were no seasons, and food just appeared all the year round? Some people therefore believed that when God's Kingdom came and everything became as God wanted it to be in a Paradise or new Garden of Eden, there would be no sin – and no seasons! So if Jesus were God's anointed agent ('Christ' or 'Messiah') somehow bringing about God's kingdom, the fig tree should have recognised him when he came near and should have burst into fruit. But it does not. It has therefore condemned and doomed itself. Jesus does not so much punish it as declare like a prophet what is already the case but not yet visible: the fig tree is as good as useless, and dead. His prayer is not that God will destroy it for him. Instead it is a way of aligning his will with God's and then announcing prophetically what things look like in God's eyes in a way that gives people a last chance to change their ways before the hidden truth becomes real. So if in our praying we see that it is God's will that the mountain that has Jerusalem and the Temple on it are about to be submerged, and announce that fact prophetically, it will indeed come to pass (unless people change) [Mark 11:22-24]. The following morning Jesus and his disciples see that the fig tree has indeed withered away [11:20-21].

In between inspecting the fig tree and finding it withered, Jesus and his disciples go back into the Temple which he had inspected the previous day. Mark wants us to see a connection. What is it? Does it help to know that the fig tree and the Temple were both, in their own ways symbols of Israel and of Israel's fruitfulness as the people of God? If so, what is Jesus doing in the Temple? There is no evidence that the people changing money or selling animals were cheating people. Money had to be changed into the Temple's currency, which was the purest coinage being minted at the time. Only the best was good enough for God. Animals were needed for the sacrifices through which the people's relationship with God was renewed at the centre of the Temple's worship. Only the purest, unblemished animals were good enough for God. It therefore made sense to buy a certified one when you got there rather than bring an uncertified and possibly unacceptable one from home. So when Jesus disrupts the money changing and the buying and selling of animals he is acting out a prophetic symbol that sacrifice should have come to an end when God's anointed agent brought the Kingdom close to it. But it has not recognised him. It has condemned itself.

The end of chapter 12 (the second section in our passage above) picks up the theme of prayer again. It also shows how far the Temple and the people have gone off track. Even the religious leaders – perhaps particularly the religious leaders – are using their religion for show and to maintain their own importance rather than to worship and serve God. They are eating up the resources of widows in the process. But the Bible tells them that God's people must not exploit widows, orphans, migrants and refugees but (in an age of no social welfare systems and when

they have no one to provide or care for them) give them what they need to live. They have turned God's ways on their head. Not one stone will be left on another.

It was not just the Temple and people of Jesus's time that got it wrong. We still do. How does Jesus want us to respond when he comes close to us? Is our worship and mission barren like the Temple's, and withering like the fig tree's?

**Prayer**

Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us,  
and not what we deserve;  
and as you have called us to your service,  
make us worthy of our calling;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

*Methodist Worship Book p. 304*

**The Lord's Prayer**