

Holy Week 2013

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

*¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”
(Mark 11:9-10. ESV)*

*¹⁷And he was teaching them and saying to them, “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.”
(Mark 11:17. ESV)*

*³⁷And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:37-39. ESV)*

*⁶And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”
(Mark 16:6-7. ESV)*

The Barren Temple And The Withered Fig Tree

Palm Sunday, 2013

Mark 11:11-25

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Mark 11:11-25. The goal on Palm Sunday morning is generally to read a text from the narratives that immediately precede the crucifixion in order to help us as a people understand the cross of Jesus Christ. Before we begin reading together, let me provide just a bit of background for this particular story.

Setting The Scene

Jesus has just completed a fairly lengthy pilgrimage from Galilee in the north down to Jericho and then he turns west from Jericho and begins climbing a long mountainous road up to Jerusalem. Jesus, like many other Jews is on his way to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. He is travelling with his 12 disciples and a huge crowd of Galilean followers. Jesus is very popular in the north. Most of his teaching and most of his miracles have occurred in the north and he has had to work very hard up to this point to keep his northern followers from starting a

civil war in order to make him king by force. John's Gospel told us that explicitly, after doing a miracle up by the Sea of Galilee Jesus actually perceived that his followers were ready for war:

¹⁵Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15. ESV)

Jesus has been trying to keep a lid on this enthusiasm because he was not looking for a military victory. He did not style himself a military messiah so all throughout Mark's Gospel we have seen Jesus telling his northern followers to keep quiet. He tells healed people to keep quiet and give glory to God, he tells his disciples to say nothing for now about what they have seen and heard. Simultaneously we have seen rumours and reports of his activity reaching Jerusalem and we have seen spies sent to investigate, test and trap. It is very clear as we read through Mark's Gospel up to this point that a showdown between Jesus of Nazareth and the religious leadership in Jerusalem is inevitable. Jesus has postponed it until a suitable time, but now, it is clear, the time is at hand. Jesus now permits his followers to go public with all their hopes and ambitions and beliefs about his identity. They scale the mountain road from Jericho to Jerusalem singing the Psalms of Ascent and even modifying them in specific praise of Jesus. People on the side of the road hail Jesus as the Son of David and Jesus doesn't tell them to keep quiet. The time for quiet is passed, the time for confrontation is at hand.

As Jesus approaches the gates of the city, he goes all in. He sends his disciples into a village with a pre-arranged password and they come back with the colt of a donkey. This is no accident. This is the first time in the Bible that we are told Jesus rode anything. In fact, one of the rules of Passover was that you were supposed to approach the city on foot as a humble pilgrim, now for the first time in the Bible Jesus rides a donkey. Why? Because Solomon, the son of David rode a donkey to his inauguration. Because the prophets said that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9. ESV)

This was no accident; Jesus is staging a prophetic demonstration. He is saying to the religious elites of Jerusalem: “I am your rightful king”.

His Galilean followers knew exactly what he was doing. That’s why it says in Mark 11:

⁸And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:9-10. ESV)

You will sometimes hear preachers say: “How fast and fickle is the crowd that could one day hail Jesus as king and the next day cry out ‘crucify him!’, ‘crucify him!’” And while its true that crowds can and often are fast and fickle that is not what’s going on here. These people are not the same people who cry out ‘crucify him!, crucify him!’ in Mark 15:13. These people are Galilean pilgrims who have followed Jesus to Jerusalem in the belief that he will be made king. The crowd in Mark 15:13 is a Jerusalem crowd made up of people who will not submit to the son of a carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee. Different people.

Jesus and his entourage enter Jerusalem. The Galilean pilgrims hail him as Messiah and King, the Jerusalem leaders gather to plot his execution. Jesus enters the temple, walks around, sees it all and leaves. And the city, poised on the brink of civil war, takes a deep breath. That was not nearly as bad as it could have been. Jesus came, took a tour and left. He walked out of the city and back to the house he has staying at in the suburbs. That brings us to our text for this morning; Mark 11:11-25. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹¹And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

¹²On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, **for it was not the season for figs.** ¹⁴And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷And he was teaching them and saying to them, “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.” ¹⁸And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came they went out of the city.

²⁰As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²²And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And whenever you stand praying, forgive,

if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”
(Mark 11:11-25. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Biblical scholars are more or less unanimous in affirming that what we have here is one story, not two. This is not a story about the temple and a separate story about a bizarre and seemingly unconnected nature miracle – these are two mutually interpreting strands of one story. Jesus frequently in the Gospels uses a miracle to interpret a teaching, for those who have eyes to see. That’s why miracles are often called “signs” - they point to the deeper truths of his identity and the deeper meanings of his teaching. So it is here. This is the last miracle in Mark’s Gospel and it’s a strange one. It is the only destructive miracle attributed to Jesus in the Bible. He heals people, walks on water, multiplies bread – all very positive, but here for no apparent reason he curses a fig tree. And, Mark is very careful to point out that it was not even the season for figs. This would be like me going up to an apple tree in the dead of winter and saying: “Cursed be ye o wretched of trees! Mayest thou wither unto ruin and damnation!” And then because I am not Jesus, taking out an ax and chopping it down. You would rightly think that I have lost my mind. Apple trees do not yield apples in the dead of winter. Therefore people who get angry at apple trees in winter are not to be trusted. Mark is telling us that something deeper is going on. And, he adds, his disciples heard him.

The fig tree story is sandwiched around the temple story. He visits the temple and then leaves and walks past a fig tree. The next day, for no apparent reason he curses the fig tree. He walks into the temple and starts a riot. He walks out past the fig tree. The next day he walks back and the fig tree has withered to its roots. And then in verse 27 he goes back into the temple. It is brutally clear for any with eyes to see that Jesus is not just cursing a fig tree; he is declaring the temple to be withered, ruined, hypocritical, superficial and condemned.

This is a deep teaching and we need to wrestle with it if we are to properly understand the significance of the cross. Let me see if I can highlight for you some of what we can safely assume Jesus is trying to teach his disciples through this highly symbolic act:

First of all, I think this story means to communicate that:

1. Religious spectacle is no substitute for religious reality

The story begins with Jesus walking into the temple, looking around, seeing everything and then leaving. He saw the buildings, the impressive stones, the coloured vestments of the priesthood, he heard the singing of the pilgrims and he heard the bleating of the sheep and his heart could have been stirred by the pageantry of it all but it wasn't. He saw through it. He saw through the pomp and the fuss and the external trappings and he perceived the inner rot behind it all. That's what Jesus is communicating in verse 13. It says that he saw a fig tree in leaf. In the spring in Palestine the fig trees put forth leaves; it is a promising and encouraging site. Jesus draws near to a tree bursting with leafy promise – it looks really good from a distance – but as he draws near he sees that it is barren. There is no fruit. It is useless. What is the point? A tree in full leaf at Passover season is making a promise it cannot fulfil; so too is the temple. So too is Israel¹. So too is Jerusalem. Filled with ceremony and pomp and circumstance she promises something she cannot deliver because she is rotten and ruined at the core.

I found the coverage of the Papal conclave on CNN last week to be absolutely fascinating. Everyone is a Catholic every 8 years or so. We love the red shoes, the white smoke, the mystery, the pomp and the pageantry. And yet the Catholic Church is rotten at the core. It promises something it can no longer deliver because it has lost the Gospel underneath all of that ceremony. Underneath the red shoes and the rich gowns and the ornate architecture the emperor has no clothes. Jesus is telling us that religious spectacle is no substitute for religious reality.

2. Sinful people inevitably corrupt sacred practices

In verse 15 Jesus goes into the temple and essentially instigates a riot. Now remember that Jesus was here yesterday and he would have seen then everything that he sees now. This isn't Jesus flying into a rage; this is Jesus enacting a carefully planned prophetic sign. Yesterday he saw

¹ As per R.T. France, Mark; p. 441.

this, walked around and went home, today he goes in and whips everybody out and turns over tables and will not even allow people to carry things through the Court of the Gentiles. Why? What is he reacting against? We have to read carefully here and we have to know our Old Testaments and our history. The Bible itself provides for the practice of temple exchange. The Bible understood that people would be travelling from far off and it would be hard for them to bring pigeons, lambs and bulls with them on their journey. So they were allowed to purchase what they needed at the temple – but – originally this had been done outside the temple – outside the city actually on the Mount of Olives. But around the time of Jesus this practice for whatever reason was moved inside the temple, specifically into the court of the Gentiles. Many historical observers believe that this was at least partly racially motivated. The Court of the Gentiles was supposed to be the place where non-Jewish people could come and celebrate the festivals. It was the place provided for Gentile worship and prayer but the Jews didn't want them there. So they filled the space with cattle and pigeons and tables and loud mouthed currency traders making prayer essentially impossible. The message was clear: Gentiles need not approach.

The problem was not the festival itself, the problem was not money changers per se, the problem was not the sacrificial system per se – all of those things are mandated in the Bible – the problem is not the mode of worship, the problem is the wretched condition of the human heart. Racism, greed and jealousy have conspired to ruin that which was designed to be beautiful and pure. Sinful people inevitably corrupt sacred practices. As it was in the beginning so it is now. A lot of people today – Christians I'm talking about – like to bad mouth the church. The church is full of hypocrites. The church is a big power grab by old white men who are trying hold on to the last stronghold of western imperial misogynistic patriarchalism, – I've heard it all and all of it from so called believers who want to be friends with Jesus while despising his bride – let me know how that turns out! But do you know what? Do you know what is wrong with the church? You. Me. Its not the structure, its not the songs we sing, its not the old fashioned doctrine – its human sin. Human sin is the biggest problem facing the church, just as it always has been. Sinful people inevitably corrupt sacred practices.

3. Agents, instruments, vessels and means who resist and reject their purpose and calling cannot presume on God's perpetual favour

The Jews had made this mistake before. In Jeremiah's day people rejected the prophet's message of impending doom and judgment because they were the chosen people and they were the custodians of the temple of God.

⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.' (Jeremiah 7:4. ESV)

Jeremiah had been warning the people that if they persisted in their wicked ways God would cast them off and destroy them utterly and false prophets were standing up and opposing Jeremiah and saying: "We are the chosen people! We have the temple of the Lord! Therefore, we cannot be rejected and destroyed!" Jeremiah says: "Don't you dare presume on the favour of the Lord".

Very often in the history of God's people, a generation arises – usually the children or grandchildren of faithful men and women – who presume that they have been born into perpetual Divine Favour. We are God's people, they say. We are an exceptional nation, they believe. We are the chosen ones and this is the promised land. They presume on God on the basis of someone else's faith. Such people are fools. And the New Testament warns Christian churches not to think they are any different than the sons of fools in the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul says:

¹⁹Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. (Romans 11:19-21. ESV)

I find it a little intriguing that this warning was given to the Church of Rome. In Canada the largest church by a country mile is the Roman Catholic Church. And many times as an Evangelical Christian I have had Catholics folks say to me: "Why are you trying to convert me? I belong to the Church of Rome! I am a spiritual descendent of Peter! Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to Peter, so I'm pretty sure I'm good to go." To which I feel inclined to respond: "Jesus I know, and Peter I know, but who are you?" Do you think that your lampstand cannot be taken away because you have Peter as your father? Do not think for a second that such a thing matters to God! Jesus – God in the flesh – is declaring in this action that vessels and agents and means can never presume on the favour of God. Israel was commissioned to be a light to the nations, a kingdom of priests bringing the truth of God to the ends of the earth. They abandoned their calling, corrupted their temple, excluded the very people they were called to reach and as a result they were rejected! If God has not spared them, why should he spare you? But this is not just a

warning for Israel or for the Church of Rome, it is a warning to us. Do not think that because your grandparents were godly and because our forefathers in this country were godly that we may presume on God's favour. Do not trust in deceptive words. The truth is if he did not spare natural branches, neither will he spare you.

Fourthly, and most significantly, Jesus is saying in this symbolic act:

4. The blood of bulls and goats is not sufficient to save sinners – therefore a body is prepared for me

There is no question that in this symbolic act – in the mutually interpreting acts of temple rioting and fig tree cursing – Jesus is declaring that the temple rites are not able to do what they promise to do. They cannot deal with human sin, something better, something greater is required. The author of Hebrews says it this way:

³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;

⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" (Hebrews 10:3-7. ESV)

Jesus is saying that he will do in his body what the temple complex with all its sacrifices could never do. He will deal once and for all with the problem of human sin. Jesus' body becomes the new and better temple. That is why in John's Gospel Jesus says:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking about the temple of his body. (John 2:19-21. ESV)

Jesus is drawing attention to the temple complex and he is saying: "This temple cannot do what it says it will do. This temple, he says, drawing attention to himself, will once and for all provide satisfaction for the sins of men. This temple will deliver that which has been promised."

Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms, no one will come to the Father except that they come through my body and my blood. There is no other name in heaven or on the earth by which men

may be saved. The blood of Christ upon the cross is sufficient for the salvation of all human kind. And yet it is applied only to those who cast themselves upon it in humility, repentance and faith. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved. The cross is the mercy seat now, the cross is the place where a Holy God meets with sinful man. We'll say more about that on Friday. Lastly here in this text we are being told that:

5. Healed people, saved by Christ, have great power through prayer

Look again at verses 22-25. Seemingly Jesus moves from the magnificent to the mundane – he has instigated a riot, effectively declared the end of the temple system and foreshadowed his own vicarious atonement on the cross and now he transitions into a helpful discourse on corporate prayer. That seems odd to us. But it is entirely appropriate and cohesive. Jesus has just rejected the temple. It was supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations. Now he says, the temple is gone, its over, its finished. You are the people of powerful prayer. You are the people who will pray the impossible into being. He says:

“Have faith in God. ²³Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:22-25. ESV)

To the newly formed people of prayer, Jesus, quite helpfully, gives some practical teaching on the conditions for effective praying. Careful reading of this text gives us a bit of a blueprint for praying with power. It seems to suggest that the conditions for effective prayer are faith, fellowship, focus and forgiveness. First of all you have to have faith. You have to believe that God can do the impossible. The idea of throwing a mountain into the sea was a common idiom for “doing the impossible”. Jesus is not suggesting that we pray for mountains to be cast into the sea – when mountains are cast into the sea that tends to create tsunamis which wipe out fishing villages, so clearly that is not in view here – it just means ‘to do the impossible’. You have to believe that God is in the business of doing the impossible. You have to have faith. You also have to be in fellowship. All of these verbs are in the plural. Jesus says this to “them” the “you” is plural. He says whatever “you – plural” ask for in prayer, whenever you-plural stand praying... Jesus is talking about the corporate community of prayer. The temple is no more, the new house

of prayer is the gathered church. When you have faith and when you pray together you are going to see mountains cast into the sea. Thirdly the passage clearly implies the necessity of focus. The old place of prayer was rejected precisely because they lost focus on their mission. They were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles and instead they became haters of Gentiles. That's a severe loss of focus. That's why elsewhere in his teachings on prayer, Jesus was fond of saying:

¹³Whatever you ask **in my name**, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (John 14:13. ESV)

When we pray "in his name" i.e. "according to his identity and mandate" then we shall have that which we ask for. Elsewhere Jesus states that explicitly, here it is obviously implied given the rejection of the old place of prayer, but everywhere it needs to be remembered. Effective prayer is prayer within the mission, identity and focus of Jesus. Lastly, Jesus says that effective prayer requires that we remain a forgiving people. When you pray, forgive. Be merciful as God in Christ has shown mercy to you. If we harbour in this church bitterness, conflict, disunity then we need not be confused at the absence of the miraculous. But if we have faith, if we maintain fellowship and focus and if we forgive then we will see mountains lifted up and cast down. We will be powerful in prayer; a kingdom of priests and a light to the nations.

Conclusion:

There is a lot going on in this magnificent passage. Reading it is exciting, understanding it is life changing but applying it at the end of the day is really the ultimate goal. This passage, understanding this story is supposed to help us take hold of the cross of Jesus Christ in faith and hope. Palm Sunday is supposed to prepare you for Good Friday. If that is the case then how should we leave this place and how we should we prepare to come back in 5 days time? Well very briefly I suggest that we should come back in a spirit of simplicity and repentance. Good Friday is a simple and humble service. We enter quietly, we sing simply and we repent. It is a service of mourning where we remember that our sin was so vile that it could only be overcome and defeated by God himself taking human flesh. God, in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, took on flesh, obeyed the law on our behalf and laid down his life, a sacrifice for our sins. Let that settle on you. Gather in simplicity and humility to reflect upon that truth. Its not the day to wear your fancy dress. Its not the day for smoke machines or fancy PowerPoint. We're going to keep it simple and real. Secondly, I suggest that we spend some time in the next 5 days

examining our hearts. Whether you are leading worship on Good Friday or participating in it make sure that your external appearance does not tell a lie about the state of your heart. Humble yourself because pride, jealousy and ambition still corrupt sacred practice. Thirdly come into this place as a supplicant, not as an owner. We have no claim on the favour of God. We are no better than the people who won't come, for had God not come to us than we would be as they and if God should leave us now we would be as they again. Therefore, where is boasting? Come humble and come filled with the knowledge of your own unworth. And cast yourself afresh upon the cross of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not just for the unsaved. The Gospel is for you and me as much for them. I need the grace of God, you need the grace of God because the flesh wars with our spirit and we are powerless in ourselves to defeat it. Come in need of the blood and in search of his Spirit. And lastly, come prepared to pray for the impossible. Come prepared to pray: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Pray in this place that the Name of the Lord and the Word of the Lord would be exalted above all things in the city of Orillia and indeed throughout the earth. Pray that the mountain of the Lord's House would be raised up above every other mountain. For that for the glory of God and the good of all people. And all God's people said: Amen.