

Mark 11:1-25 – The Messenger of the Covenant

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” ¹⁰ “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest!”

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

¹² The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing 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. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, “May no-one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area 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, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And 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’.”

¹⁸ The 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.

¹⁹ When evening came, they went out of the city.

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

²² “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. ²³ “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”
[Mark 11:1-25 (NIV)]

Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem

It was Passover time. Crowds of people had been gathering from all over Judea and Galilee and travelling up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. There was a mood of celebration as they recalled the way God had saved their ancestors from Egypt. They had been oppressed by a powerful empire but God had remembered his covenant with Abraham and had come down in judgment upon Egypt and had rescued his people, setting them free to worship him. There was a mood of expectation as the crowds looked for God to do it again; for him to visit them and deliver them now from the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. They wanted God to send to them a deliverer, one greater than Moses, one greater than David. They wanted God to send the Messiah.

Jesus and his disciples were travelling up to Jerusalem from Jericho, no doubt surrounded by a great crowd of pilgrims travelling up with them. The road was very steep, climbing from Jericho which is 800 feet below sea level to Jerusalem 3,000 feet above sea level in only a dozen or so miles. Eventually they arrived at the Mount of Olives, and now at last they can see Jerusalem before them – the city of God; the city of the great King. With Jesus among them the crowds are full of expectation. What will Jesus do?

You know the story. Jesus sent some of his disciples to fetch a young donkey and it is on this donkey that Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem. Jesus is consciously acting out Old Testament prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9). The prophecy goes on to state how this king will banish the war chariots and bring in a reign of peace. The crowds seem to recognise that Jesus is proclaiming himself to be the promised king for they lay coats and palm branches in his path and cry out in expectation, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" The first part of their acclamation is taken directly from Psalm 118:25-26. This was one of a group of celebration psalms (113-118) that the crowds would have been singing together as they travelled up to Jerusalem. Now they use the familiar praises of this psalm to acknowledge Jesus as their king.

But what kind of a king is Jesus? Will he be 'a king like the nations', as Israel had requested long ago – a king like Caesar; one who would make peace through waging war? Would he be a king like David whose hands were so stained with blood that God would not allow him to build the temple? Would he be a king like Solomon who made crafty political alliances, stockpiling wives and weapons of war? What kind of a king is Jesus?

The answer is indicated already by his entry into Jerusalem, humble and upon a donkey. The answer is indicated even in the psalm with which the crowds acknowledge his kingship, for the verses preceding those they shout out say this, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone: the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made [or, "on which the Lord has acted"]; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (vv. 22-24). What is this stone that the builders are rejecting and of what is this stone to become the capstone?

What will Jesus do next?

The Cleansing of the Temple

Jesus returned to rest for the night in Bethany. The following morning he re-entered Jerusalem and, going to the temple, drove out those whose trading activity was supplying those who came to offer sacrifices. In driving them out Jesus quoted words from the end of Isaiah 56:7, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." This is part of a prophecy which looks forward to the day when people from all nations and all backgrounds will rejoice before God in his temple. What is the meaning of Jesus actions and his words? How will he fulfil this vision of Isaiah?

As with Jesus entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, so also in this 'cleansing' of the Temple, Jesus is acting out Old Testament prophecy. The prophet Malachi spoke and wrote after the Israelites had returned from exile. The temple had been rebuilt but it was a poor temple compared with the one Solomon had built. Most tragically of all, it lacked the symbols of God's presence – God's glory had departed at the time of the Exile and the ark had been lost. By the time of Malachi the Israelites had begun to think that God had lost interest in them and that they might as well live how they pleased. Listen to Malachi's words in Malachi 2:17-3:4:

¹⁷ You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

¹ "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. [NIV]

The temple faces God's judgment: In acting out the words of this prophecy Jesus is declaring that *he* is the Lord who has come to his temple. He is the messenger of the covenant they have professed to long for. But who can stand when he appears? Jesus comes to the temple not just to correct a few abuses, he comes in judgment. And yet it is a judgment designed to create a people who will worship God in righteousness.

This judgment is portrayed in the strange incident of the cursing of the fig tree. The way in which the cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between the two halves of the story about the fig tree makes it clear that they belong together – we must understand and interpret each in the light of the other.

Doesn't it seem rather unfair to you that Jesus should curse this poor fig tree for having no figs on it when it was not even the season for figs? It is impossible to understand this act of Jesus unless we see it as an acted parable. The fruitless fig tree is a picture of Israel, a people who honour God with their lips but not with fruitful lives. Jesus words and action in cursing the fig tree is a declaration of what is shortly to happen to Jerusalem and its temple. It is to suffer the judgment of God and will never again be restored. This also is the meaning of Jesus' strange words in verses 22-23. When Jesus encourages his disciples to pray that will remove a mountain he is not simply telling them that prayer removes obstacles. It is *this* mountain, the temple mount in Jerusalem, that he is speaking of. He encourages the disciples to join with him in praying for its 'removal', i.e. for judgment to fall upon it. But they are to pray not in a vengeful spirit but with a sense of sadness and a desire that Israel might find forgiveness.

In Jesus words and actions, both in connection with the fig tree and the temple, he is declaring the judgment of God upon Israel and that this judgment comes in some strange way through Jesus himself. *He* is the Lord who has come to his temple and he has come not to adjust some minor abuses but to sweep it away.

But how can this be? The temple was built at God's command and formed a central element of the covenant – it was the place where God dwelt with his people. How can Jesus come as messenger of the covenant – the one who comes to affirm the covenant – and yet come in judgment upon the temple?

God will raise up a new temple: Do you remember the accusation that was brought against Jesus at his trial – that he had said he would "Destroy this man-made temple and build another not made by hands in three days" (Mk 14:57-58)? This accusation, brought with malice and misunderstanding was yet based upon words that Jesus is recorded to have said when he cleansed the temple according to John 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Jesus' coming to his temple signifies its imminent destruction, but it will be replaced with a more perfect temple, with the risen Christ himself. This is the meaning of Jesus' words and actions.

Jesus is the one in whom the temple finds its fulfilment. He is the one in whom the Living God comes to dwell among his people and to display his glory: he is Immanuel, God with us. He is the place where a perfect sacrifice is offered for sin once and for all: he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is not simply that Jesus here acts out the destruction of the temple; he *is* the temple of God upon whom the destruction of God falls and is exhausted. He is therefore the place where God meets us in mercy. He is the place where open access is to be found into the presence of God – in him and through him the veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom. He himself is our great high priest, the one who acts as our mediator in the presence of God. He is the focus of our worship. *He* is the temple of God.

But there is more. Jesus, in acting out the prophecy of Malachi is declaring that God is now creating a new people for himself. Listen to Malachi 3:3b and 17-18, "Then the Lord will have people who will bring offerings in righteousness... 'They will be mine,' says the Lord Almighty, 'in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." Jesus has come to create a people who will worship God not on this mountain in Jerusalem (or that mountain in Samaria) but who will worship God in spirit and in truth. This also is part of the new temple which Jesus is building. *We* are that temple. Listen to the way this is expressed by the apostle Peter:

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,"⁸ and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:4-10 (NIV)

Through Christ, *you* have become (or are becoming) the temple of God – a people among whom God dwells in the person of Christ and the power of the Spirit. And you are a people whom God has commissioned with a priestly ministry of bringing God to the world and the world to God.

Where is the God of Justice?

In Malachi's day, as in ours, many looked at the evils of their society and asked why God did not do something about it: "Where is the God of justice?" they asked (Malachi 2:17). This is God's response. The God of justice has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Here is where we see our God, in the person of Jesus riding humbly into Jerusalem. Yet at the same time we see him coming in judgement, judgement upon Jerusalem and its temple. That judgement, however, falls firstly upon him – he is the temple that is first destroyed only that it might be raised again in three days. This is how the King of the Jews establishes his kingdom of peace – he reigns from the tree. This is how he creates for himself a new people who will worship him in spirit and in truth – who will offer him not merely the worship of their lips but of lives made new, lives marked by righteousness, justice and peace.

And it is here, as we meet as we meet together as his people, and particularly as we meet around the Lord's Table, that the Lord again and again meets with us. We have come together to celebrate a greater Passover and this celebration is more than mere remembrance. The Lord whom we seek comes to us here: he comes to his temple; he comes as the messenger of the covenant. It is a serious matter to meet around this table for the Lord comes to us here in judgement. Yet he comes not to destroy but to cleanse and to forgive through the blood of the covenant – through his own blood shed for us. He comes not to consume but to refine. He comes to meet us with the affirmation, "They will be mine." He comes to show us that judgment is past and to call us into life.

And so it is here that we acknowledge him with our worship, our glad cries of "Hosanna!" It is here that, in love and adoration and in deep joy we lay our lives before him as he calls us ever and afresh to **be** his people.

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