

could quickly be devastated in the heat of the countryside, but was this really a picture of what would happen to Israel? Did Jesus intend to 'curse' Israel to death?

Jesus could hear Peter's concern and He immediately addressed the apparent impossibility of Israel's recovery after rejecting her own God and Messiah (as they were doing, and as Jesus had been explaining to Peter and the disciples ever since 'Caesarea Philippi' – 8:31f.). Peter, just like Paul, decades later (in Romans 9-11), would have deeply agonised over the fate of his own people. Surely they could not be rejected for ever, and surely they could somehow be saved? All this was going on in Peter's mind, and it was in answer to this that Jesus said these famous words; 'whoever says to this mountain, "Go and throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt ... but believes ... it will be done for him.' (11:23). Now Jesus had said something like this on a number of occasions, each time with the general meaning that the impossible could be achieved through faith (see Matt 17:20, 21:21). In this case, it was therefore possible for the Old Testament people of Israel to be saved through the faith of the New Testament people of God, the Church!

This, I believe, is the reason why Jesus went on to say; 'whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.' (11:24). This, again, was a general saying that Jesus used on several occasions in His ministry and for different reasons, and here, it most definitely relates to the future of Israel after the coming of the Messiah, and the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews. When Jesus went on to conclude this passage with the words; 'if you have anything against anyone, forgive, so that your father in heaven may forgive you,' He made it clear that the work of the Christian Church should be to forgive the people of Israel and pray for their salvation.

Application

It is so easy for us to read the last three verses of this passage as somehow divorced from what Mark is telling us in this part of His Gospel. Each saying is indeed generally important on its own, firstly about 'moving mountains' by faith, secondly, that 'everything we ask in prayer' will be granted, and thirdly that if we forgive others, then God will forgive us and save us. Each saying, however, has a specific place in Scripture, and although the first two appear to be some kind of spiritual 'carte blanche' for getting what we want, we must learn from Jesus that unless their use is about something close to the Father's heart, then we misunderstand them completely. Certainly, the subject of the future of the people of Israel is something close to God's heart, and we should not forget that. Indeed, we should say that this passage strongly tells us that the Christian church has a duty to pray for the people of Israel and their salvation. It is not something which I am aware is generally done. There are a few groups of people who are genuinely concerned about this issue, but the attitude of the whole church of God is what is important. It seems to me that the church needs to repent of its forgetfulness of the people of Israel and indeed the Old Testament itself, in order to be in line with the purposes of God (11:23-25).

Jesus was radically dismissive of religion as a structure which developed into a system which controlled people's relationship with God. This is what the cleansing of the Temple is largely about. Jesus had to make this stand against His own people, and there are times when we have to make this stand against our own churches; especially when the way it is organized and run prevents people's genuine faith from flourishing. I fear there are too many examples of this, and it is not just 'people up there' who are guilty of making a false religion out of faith in Christ. It is possible for us all to do this if we become over-zealous about what we believe without remaining in obedience and submission to Scripture and our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is very important that we are aware of this.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you think about the future of Israel in God's plans.
2. What does this passage suggest was on Jesus' mind when He first came to Jerusalem?
3. If possible, find a map of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Christ, and find out as much as you can about what went on there. How does this fit with our text?

Discipleship

There is little doubt about how we should respond, today. You may not have thought that the issues of 'what happens to the Jews' is important for your Christian discipleship. However, we should consider how we might include prayers for the salvation of Israel within the life of our church, and also in our own personal quiet time (I am considering how to incorporate it into this web-site!). I do not wish to be prescriptive about this, simply to make the suggestion to you as strongly as I can.

Final Prayer

Great Lord and Master; we are amazed at the complexity of our lives. There is so much, we cannot remember all that has happened to us each day! Help us, we pray, to remember those things that are spiritually important and to forget what is best left behind; and give us the grace to know the difference! AMEN

Prayer

Let us rejoice in You, our Lord and Saviour. You are both the Temple and the Priest; You are the King upon the throne, and the Servant in the courtyard; You are our Guide along life's pathway, and the Healer of our wounded souls. You are more to us than those who trust in mere humanity can ever understand, for You are the only God, and our Lord of All. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Streets

Pray for the young people who claim the streets in towns and cities at night, often changing the 'culture' of a neighbourhood quite radically in the evenings and overnight. Some people find this to be a difficult feature of life today, but there are many who try to work with young people on the streets at night. Pray for them and for their safety, especially any you know who do this.

Meditation

Jesus, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear the cries
Of those whose lives are blighted or controlled
By the fearsome power of a broken heart;
Lost hope, and emotions torn apart by strife.

Too many people harbour brokenness;
Wounded souls; they do their best to carry on.
They need a hand to hold, and hear they're loved,
But life's true loves are irretrievably lost.

Then, committed to the 'sick list' life, they find
That counselling confirms the awful truth.
Only when they face the 'pain too painful'
Can human help begin to touch their problem.

Jesus, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear the cries;
Come break the torrid grip of Satan's vice
Which turns our living into earthy hell:
And by Your Cross and endless love,
Bind up the hopeless human heart,
Love it! Heal it! Save it! Lead it on!

Bible Study - Mark 11:12-25

¹² On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He was hungry. ¹³ When He saw a fig tree in leaf some way off, He went to see if He could find anything on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And His disciples heard Him say it.

¹⁵ They came to Jerusalem, and Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out those who sold and bought in the temple. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons, ¹⁶ and He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He taught them and said 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 thieves."'

¹⁸ The chief priests and the scribes heard this and continued to seek a way to kill Him; they feared Him because the entire crowd was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹ When evening came, they went out of the city.

²⁰ In the morning as they walked by, they saw the fig tree, withered away from the roots.

²¹ Peter remembered this, and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered away.' ²² Jesus replied and said to them, 'Have faith in God, ²³ Amen, I tell you, whoever says to this mountain, "Go and 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 So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive, so that your father in heaven may forgive you.'

Review

This whole section of Mark's Gospel contains some powerful stories. We should expect this, for Jesus had just come to Jerusalem as the Messiah; the 'Chosen One' of God, promised centuries before in different Old Testament prophecies which spoke of God's intention to establish the new rule of His Kingdom on earth. Now Jesus had at last come to Jerusalem, we should expect that the stories we read might contain something of the drama and the mystery of what God was doing. However, when we read this passage from our perspective today, we can easily fail to spot what it was about these events which made them so incredible and dramatic for those who first saw them and heard about them. We might be shocked to read about what Jesus did in the Temple (11:15-17), but the story of the fig tree (11:12-14 and 20-21) and Jesus' teaching about faith and prayer (11:22-25) are for us, just more incidents and more teaching. How does all this go together to make a powerful dramatic tale which befits the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem?

The whole section does in fact go together, and it is only when we see the connections that the pieces all fit together and Mark's picture becomes clear. What I shall now explain is the subject of much debate today, and rightly so, but it is the traditional understanding of this text, and it is incredibly important for the Gospel. To start with, we must accept that the fig tree was, together with the vine, an accepted 'symbol' of the people of Israel (Hosea 9:10,16-17; Micah 7:1, and Jeremiah 8:13 etc.) which although intended to bear fruit in due season, failed to produce the fruit for the Kingdom which was intended, and would therefore be destroyed by God. This much alone can be found out by reading the Old Testament. Now with this in mind, the story of what happens to Jesus as He walks to Jerusalem the day after He arrived in triumph appears obvious. It is what we might call an 'acted out parable' of Jesus' life's experience with the people of Israel. The fig tree bore no fruit, and showed no sign of it, in or out of season (11:13).

Then, armed with this, we can easily interpret the actions of Jesus by which He 'cleansed' the outer courtyards of the Temple. This great centre of the worship of God within Jerusalem had failed either to enable people to worship God or to witness to the world about the love of God. All that people could perceive from the outer courtyards was people going about the 'business' of the Temple, but nothing to do with God Himself. Jesus declared the Temple a failure, because it was not a 'house of prayer', but a 'den of robbers' (11:17). Let there be no doubt; what Jesus did was technically an act of desecration which would have offended all who came into the Temple. The chief priests who came to witness what was going on took no action because they 'feared' both Him and the response of the crowds, but they were prepared to bide their time and make sure that their ultimate plan to have Him killed would succeed (11:18).

Now that Jesus had 'cleansed the Temple', Mark picked up the theme of the 'fig tree' once again. Jesus, the Messiah had ritually desecrated the Temple, so the fig tree was of no further use, and this was evidenced by the sight of the shrivelled fig tree, noticed by Peter (11:20). It would have been with some shock that Peter observed the result of Jesus' uncharacteristic curse, for even though Peter was to become the leader of the Christian church which replaced Judaism as the means God used to bring the message of His love to the world, Peter would have been one of the first to say he believed that God still had some ultimate plan for the Jewish people within His kingdom; but the fig tree (Israel) was dead! It was in the light of this apparently impossible situation that Jesus said to Peter 'have faith', and then spoke about having faith sufficient to throw a mountain into the sea (11:23,24). He was simply telling Peter that by faith, the impossible 'mountain' could be moved; and Israel though now dead, could be revived. All this may not be what we first thought, but this is extremely important.

Going Deeper

In explaining this traditional understanding of the cursing of the fig-tree and the cleansing of the Temple, I have not tried to suggest that these things did not happen. That is not the issue, the point is this, what do these events mean and why has Mark recorded them? If you can see the principles of what Mark was trying to do, then even more of this incredible passage now becomes clear.

Jesus curses the fig tree

All manner of suggestions have been made to try and explain why Jesus cursed the fig tree (11:14). It seems such a random and irrational act from our point of view. I even read one commentary which considered why the women of the house where Jesus had stayed overnight had allowed him to leave for a day in Jerusalem without a full breakfast! The writers reckoned that this could form part of an understanding of why Jesus was hungry and upset when he found that there were no figs on the tree (11:12), and the reason why He cursed it!

If our understanding of the time of year that Jesus came to Jerusalem is correct (he died a few days later at the feast of Passover in the first month of the Jewish year), then no figs would have been expected. Mark does in fact record that it was not the season for ripe figs (11:13). None of what Mark recorded makes sense from a purely literal point of view, so when we put everything together, there seems little doubt that Jesus did what He did, in full view of the disciples (11:14) in order to make the beginnings of a statement to them about Israel and the purposes of God (as above). Jesus had already commissioned the twelve disciples as the leaders of the new community of God's people (3:13-19), so the old would have to give way to the new; 'may no-one ever eat of you again' said Jesus, about Israel!

Jesus cleanses the Temple

When Jesus went into the Temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, we tend to have a picture in our minds of Jesus removing traders who should not have been inside the Temple. The situation was like this. The Temple grounds were enormous, and the outer courtyard where all this took place was the court of women and Gentiles. In other words, it was the part of the Temple where Gentiles and women were allowed to come, but only men could go into the large courtyard beyond, where worship took place (there was a third inner courtyard where priests performed sacrifices which also contained the sacred room called the 'Holy of Holies'). In this outer courtyard, people changed their common 'Roman' money used for normal life outside the Temple for exclusively Jewish money which was used for worship in the Temple. The Roman imagery on the normal coins was not allowed beyond the court of women and Gentiles. In addition, traders sold animals for the purpose of sacrificial offerings to people who had come without the necessary animals or birds. A great deal of trade went on, and without it, the Temple would not have functioned as a place of worship in the Jewish sense.

With all this in mind, we wonder why Jesus did all this. He could have gone into the inner sanctuaries to make His point, but it was a far more public desecration to do what He did; putting a stop to the trade of money and animals in the outer courtyard, upon which the whole system of the Temple functioned. This is why 'He did not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.' (11:16). Some have suggested that people used the courtyards of the enormous Temple as a short-cut across the city, and Jesus was unhappy about this. This is just fanciful thinking, for all Jesus was concerned to do was to stop people using the Temple as a place in which worship was 'traded'! Jesus quoted two Old Testament passages in order to make clear what He meant by this action; Isaiah 56:7; 'for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples'; and Jeremiah 7:11 'has this house, which is called by my name ... become a den of thieves?' (11:17)

Everything Jesus did was designed to draw attention to the failure of Jewish religion to provide a means for God to do His will. The original Covenant purpose of God's choice of the people of Israel was that they should be a 'blessing to the nations' (Genesis 12:2,3) and a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and yet the Gentiles were reduced to the outer courtyard, only able to take part in the worship of God by trading, not by taking part in the 'real' worship of prayer. This was Jesus' point, and we will not understand Mark's Gospel or his record of Jesus' last days unless we follow this.

Jesus re-assures Peter about the fig tree

When the disciples saw the fig tree, they saw that it was 'withered at the roots', and there was little chance of there being any life left in the plant. The meaning of what they saw was obvious; Israel had failed and was no longer essential to God's purposes. However, Jesus was not willing to merely wipe away the remembrance of Israel even though it had failed, and this is something of which we need to be aware before we can understand what happens next in our reading. The rest of Scripture speaks about how God does not ultimately abandon Israel, and we must remember this if we are to interpret this passage. Briefly, the New Testament (see Romans 9-11) asserts that although Israel failed and is not now God's agent of salvation, there are two main reasons why they remain 'God's people' in a special sense and with an abiding value. Firstly, God revealed Himself to them through their history, and this revelation remains true and correct even if Israel herself failed to appreciate it; secondly, the faithfulness of God means that although His chosen people failed, He will not ultimately abandon them, but after Christ comes again and at some point in the final judgement, God will restore Israel and join her to the Church, to conclude the final great gathering of all those who glorify God ().

Now, to return to the passage; you may feel that what I now say is a bit farfetched. From our view-point today, it is; but people of Jesus' day would have spotted all this very quickly, because this was their culture. Peter's astonishment in verse 21 is a reflection of his own puzzlement at the sight of the fig tree. He knew that what he saw had 'meaning', and he was astonished that the fig tree (Israel) had withered away so quickly. Obviously, a plant devoid of fluids from its roots