

Have faith in the authoritative Christ

Mark 11:20-33 - Littlebourne 28th November 2021

Last week, Bernard pointed out that we were looking at a Markan sandwich - a passage about something, that is sandwiched between passages that illuminate what we are reading about. We saw Jesus curse a fig tree, then cleanse the temple, and now today's passage starts by finishing the sandwich of the fig tree.

Let's look at the first part of the fig tree narrative first (verses 12-14):

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13 And 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. 14 And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

This fig tree was in leaf - usually an indication that there is fruit on it. At first glance, it appears that the tree will contain fruit, but on closer inspection, there is none.

Following this, we heard last week about Jesus in the temple - he enters what is the majestic outer courts of the temple, which would have been the most impressive building complex his disciples and him would likely have ever seen. We don't know exactly the appearance of the temple, but we know that it was enormous, and that much of the central building was plated in gold.

All the outward appearance of holiness - from a distance, you'd expect that what was going on inside must be the most sacred things imaginable, that the temple would be a place of reverence and worship and prayer. But as Jesus and his disciples get close, what they find is that far from being (verse 17) 'a house of prayer for all the nations', it is rather a 'den of robbers'. What outwardly appears to be a place of where people offer to God is instead a place where people are seeking their own riches.

Jesus cursed the fig tree for its fruitlessness, for not living up to what it appeared to be when it had foliage but no figs. The temple, in all its splendour, conceals the fact that it does not bring the fruit of righteousness that God required from Israel. In Mark chapter 7 (verse 6) Jesus, talking to the religious leaders, quotes from Isaiah, "This people honours me with their lips but their heart is far from me."

That evening Jesus and the disciples leave the city and today's passage starts as they are coming back in the morning.

v20-21

*20 As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.
21 And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."*

Just as Jesus said, nobody would eat from this tree again. It had withered completely, down to the roots. A complete destruction. Now if the fig tree is emblematic of the temple, where outward form obscures a fruitless centre, what does this mean?

Probably we all know that the temple in Jerusalem is no longer standing - it was torn down completely in AD70, forty years or so after Jesus' death. Jews rebelled against the Romans in AD66 and four years later, having quashed the rebellion across almost all of the rest of Palestine, the Roman general Titus turned his focus to Jerusalem. Three days before Passover, four legions of Roman soldiers surrounded the city and laid siege. Josephus, who was commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee, who then surrendered to the Romans and later served as Titus' translator during the siege of Jerusalem, writes that the city was crowded because it was Passover and he estimated that a million people died during the siege and eventual destruction of the city.

We'll I'm sure talk more about this when we get to chapter 13, when Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, but the point is that just as the fig tree withered to its roots, so the temple and that system of worship completely withered to its roots - Jesus says in chapter 13 verse 2 that "there will not be one stone upon another that will not be thrown down".

As Jesus is approaching his death and resurrection, the temple way of doing things is passing away. The sacrificial system is coming to an end. Not that sacrifice is no longer required, but rather we're approaching the one sacrifice that will suffice for all. Jesus is the one who fulfills the sacrificial system himself and is our great high priest who endures forever.

Peter sounds astonished that the miracle happened, that Jesus' cursing the fig tree followed through. What does Jesus say in response?

v22-24

22 And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 23 Truly, 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. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Peter is astonished that the miracle happened, but Jesus was not amazed at all by what happened. It's as if Jesus is saying "Of course it withered. And as long as you believe when you pray, anything can happen, even the impossible". In one sense, what was accomplished was not that hard. It simply took faith.

Now the obvious way in which we can get the wrong end of the stick is to think that God will give us *anything* if we just believe enough - that what we lack is due to lack of faith and that we just need to ask, believing we'll be given it, and we'll get exactly what we want. Unsurprisingly, these verses are popular with the proponents of the "prosperity gospel".

The prosperity gospel is the view that there's a sort of contract between a person and God where we have faith in him and in return he's sort of bound to give us health and wealth and prosperity of all kinds. It teaches that there's an easy fix for everything - you just need to believe harder. Positive thinking taken to the extreme. To generalise, it's a way of using God to get what you want. It's man centred.

I think this passage is talking about the exact opposite of this - Jesus starts by saying "have faith in God". The centre of our focus should be on God. Not just have faith, but have faith in God. It is God that moves the mountain, the object of our faith is God, not anything else. It's not our faith, as if faith were a work that we do, that moves anything. Our Creator works out all things according to the counsel of His will, rather than ours (Ephesians 1:11). If we ask for something not in His will, we cannot expect to receive it.

We can expect that God will bless us however. The most important blessing we receive is that of forgiveness of sin and adoption into God's family. Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12-14:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

God's word does promise us blessings - but those blessings are not necessarily going to follow our earthly pattern of what we think blessing looks like.

Praying in faith means being willing to acquiesce to God's will when He says no to our requests as well as when he says yes. Faith fuels prayer, but it is not faith in what we ask for but faith in the Lord. He alone knows what is best for us, and we should trust Him to answer us as He sees fit, for His answer is ultimately for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28).

So faith is essential in our prayers, but what else?

v25-26

25 And 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.”

Now the first thing you might notice is that there's no verse 26. Some manuscripts add a phrase: "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses". It's likely that this sentence was added later in some copies, so most translations omit it here. That's not to say that it's wrong - it's very similar to Matthew 6:14-15. It might have been that those making copies of this section knew Matthew 6 well and added the phrase to match the passages together.

In addition to faith, we must be forgiving of those that have wronged us. We mustn't hold grudges. Another way we might get this passage wrong is thinking that we need to be *in ourselves* perfectly faithful and perfectly forgiving for God to hear our prayers at all. But that's getting things backwards.

Think about what Paul says in Romans 5 verse 8:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The forgiveness of God comes before our forgiveness of others. Ephesians 4 verse 32:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Our ability to forgive others, our capacity to fight our sinful desires for vengeance, is dependent on the Holy Spirit's work in us - in his transforming us to be more Christlike in our thoughts and actions. As always, God is most concerned with our hearts, and our forgiving hearts indicate that we have seen our sin and have truly cast ourselves on the Lord's mercy.

Sometimes people describe God's love for us as 'unconditional'. Now in one sense, that's completely true. Like we just saw from Romans 5 - whilst we were still sinners, whilst we were actively in rebellion against God, Christ died for us. God's love for us is not conditioned on anything in us, anything we do or that we could do - it's entirely by grace alone. However, in another sense God's love for us is conditional - it's conditional on his justice being fulfilled. God cannot show love and mercy at the expense of his justice - his justice is perfect. God's love for us is conditional on Christ's sacrifice, his atoning death and resurrection.

Similarly, forgiveness is given to us unconditionally - we don't deserve it in any way. But it's also conditional on us being changed - God doesn't forgive the unrepentant, God doesn't forgive those that won't forgive others. But our capacity for repentance and our capacity to forgive others is something that is God given - it's the Holy Spirit within us, transforming us that allows this possibility. God won't save someone who is not being sanctified, but thankfully he doesn't leave it to us to sanctify ourselves.

v27-28

27 And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, 28 and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"

Chief priests, scribes and elders all came to Jesus. This wasn't a chance encounter with a couple of people in the temple courts. The religious authorities together were alarmed at Jesus' teaching. They saw the stir the Jesus caused yesterday and want to put a stop to it. The trouble is, they have no grounds - they know he did nothing wrong. They could not say that His teaching was contrary to Holy Scripture, or that His life was sinful. Instead they ask by what authority he teaches and admonishes.

As we just heard about the coming destruction of the temple, Mark makes clear now and in the next sections up to chapter 12 verse 27 that the religious leaders are rejecting Jesus, as they rejected God's messengers, the prophets, before him. Those who would soon sponsor his arrest and execution are struggling to find a way to trap him.

I imagine that they were especially alarmed at the events of yesterday, but the question of Jesus' authority has been posed since chapter 1 of Mark. In chapter 1 verse 22, as Jesus is in the synagogue, people are astonished at his authoritative teaching. Chapter 2 verse 10, Jesus tells the scribes who are witnessing his healing of the paralytic that he has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus has shown himself to possess greater authority than the religious leaders for some time and they still have no answer.

The temple, symbolic of God's authority, was a particularly apt place for such a question to be raised, and the query itself could be an attempt by the leaders to trap Jesus. If Jesus were to answer that His authority came from man or that no one gave Him any authority, the religious leaders could safely tell others to ignore Him. If God did not send Jesus or appoint Him, why listen to Him? On the other hand, if Jesus were to reply that God gave Him His authority, the leaders could charge Him with blasphemy. They want Jesus to admit to this, rather than for themselves to admit it.

So Jesus answers in a clever way.

v29-33

29 Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." 31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 32 But shall we say, 'From man?'"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. 33 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

We've seen before Jesus answering question with a question, back at the beginning of chapter 10 when the Pharisees question Jesus regarding divorce. We'll see it again when Jesus is confronted about paying taxes, another attempt to trap Jesus. What's distinctive here is that Jesus' answer to their question is dependent on the answer they give to his. Jesus stakes his authority with John - if John is a valid authority, so is Jesus. John already effected the split between the ordinary people and the religious leaders.

The leaders' reticence to answer, lest they be trapped by their words and deeds, shows that they didn't really want to hear what Jesus had to say in the first place. The trouble for them is that Jesus' authority was undeniable. Their spokesman had to feign ignorance just to avoid admitting it.

Jesus' response to the Jewish authorities also reveals His own authority. He had more authority than they did, so He was not compelled to answer them. His response is in effect an *unspoken* and ultimate question: "Do you recognise and submit to My authority?"

Conclusion

Bernard mentioned last week that Jesus is prophet, priest and king. In this passage we've seen all three.

We've seen him prophecy, foretelling the destruction of the temple and its system through the illustration of the fig tree, and through his teaching as one with God's authority.

We've see him as priest, him who will offer sacrifice on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sin, not continually in a temple made by man, but one and for all in his own death and resurrection.

Lastly, we've seen him as authoritative king of all. So have faith in Christ.