

## **Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: February 17<sup>th</sup>: Mark 11: 1-14: Some Notes**

This is a fascinating short section. A triumphant procession, though young animal (Mark doesn't say donkey) not war horse; a quick look round the Temple (not even time to buy a tourist guide); then it is getting dark (gates about to shut), so walk (or donkey again?) back to Bethany. The following morning begins inauspiciously with cursing a fig tree for not producing figs – at a time of year when fruit really couldn't be expected. Odd or what?

It is going to be very tempting to run this and our next session together – partly because Mark in effect tells the “Palm Sunday” story in two parts, and partly because Mark puts the cleansing of the Temple in a fig tree parable sandwich. But please try to savour the two sessions separately.

This is the first time that Mark tells of Jesus in Jerusalem, and Matthew and Luke are sort of the same. John has Jesus as a frequent visitor to Jerusalem. None of the four Gospels sets out to tell the whole Jesus story, so the differences are not worrying. Given the huge importance to Jews of their Temple, given Jesus' evident arrangement with the donkey owner, given the close friendship of Jesus with Martha, Mary and Lazarus at Bethany (as close to Jerusalem as Shirley to central Croydon, we can assume that Jesus had been to Jerusalem before. (Remember that for nearly 20 years Jesus of Nazareth had been a Jewish man with a Temple Festival obligation, and no obvious problems other than the bus time table with going “up” to Jerusalem. Jericho is only 12 miles from Jerusalem, but a steep uphill climb through mainly desert. From B and B, it is easy and pleasant. Incidentally, we think Bethphage means “house of figs” and Bethany “house of dates”.

The procession: The well-informed Radio 4 journalist reporting on this short journey would probably have noted: 1) riding not walking, so statement about this being a VIP; 2) colt not ridden before, so this has religious significance; 3) donkey rather than horse, so, if a king, a king coming in peace rather than with war-like plans; 4) crowd using Messiah language; 5) hard not to recall Judas Maccabaeus riding into Jerusalem having defeated Antiochus and on his way to cleansing the Temple which had been paganised/polluted big time; 6) crowd shouting “God save us now!”; 7) Galilee mob highly excited and storming into a Jerusalem swollen to six times its normal population – both Roman and Jewish authorities going to be jumpy!

So, roll of drums, overture, curtain up.... then a quick look round and back to the B & B. You may remember the sketch in which the little group sat on the mountain top awaiting the end of the world... and nothing happened. They all looked at their watches, and then “...Same time tomorrow?” Anti-climax? I'm making this up, and the commentaries don't seem to say it; but is there a message here about not rushing into things, and taking time for quiet reflection? “We've got to be seen to be doing something” isn't necessarily wise, although it is entirely understandable, Professionally, in a church or other group, in personal relationships, it is sometimes best practice to walk past the waiting journalists with

“I’m going to think about it. Sleep well.” OK, it’s true that if the guy is pointing a gun at your head, you may have to do some deciding there and then; but instant decision making should not be the norm. What does “Waiting on the Lord” mean for you?

I’ve included the first part of the fig tree story here for various reasons. It sounds exactly the opposite to waiting on the Lord. Jesus seems to be saying “I want figs and I want them now” – despite the fact that, as our church fig tree shows, you get leaves in Spring and edible fruit in early Summer; and if there are little green early figs they really are not good to eat. It’s like cussing the rose bush for not flowering in January.. and this is the Jesus who, when He was hungry (very hungry) refused to meet his needs by turning stones into bread.

The suggestion that Jesus is just showing what prayer in faith can do is unconvincing – prayer should have a practical beneficial outcome, and that doesn’t describe a dead fig tree. The general view seems to be that this is, from Mark’s perspective, an action parable about the Temple no longer serving its proper purpose and being destroyed. Though the more devious among us might suspect that, at a time of heightened awareness, the disciples saw a dying fig tree, and Jesus remarked that useless things did die sooner or later. What do you think? P.S. Do remember the more positive Bible story of the fig tree not coming up to expectations, and being given a second chance. Don’t write anybody off too easily... or indeed, in the case of people, at all!