

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: February 24th: Mark 11:15-33: Some Notes

After a good night's sleep, Jesus storms into the Temple as a change-maker, instead of just looking round as a peaceful visitor. The authorities don't like it one bit. On the way in the next day, there is time to reflect on a dead fig tree. The reflection targets faith and forgiveness. The Temple authorities ask Jesus where his authority comes from; and his reply temporarily silences them.

It is hard for us to re-capture the importance of the Temple; but we know about its size and structure. The whole site was 30 acres – about the same size as the Bethlem Hospital site. There was an outer Court of the Gentiles, beyond which Gentiles could not venture, threatened with death if they tried. Then the Court of the Women; though women could go further to offer sacrifice. Then the Court of the Men. Then the especially holy inner sanctuary. What was Jesus so angry about? On the face of it, his targets were the front-line money men: those changing ordinary money into Temple money (and making a profit for themselves and for their Temple authority masters); those selling up-to-standard sacrificial animals to replace the animals with which they found fault (again making a money); those selling doves and pigeons, the poor man's sacrificial animals, (at a substantial profit margin). On this interpretation, the problem is the commercialisation of worship, and exploitation of poorer people who couldn't afford the "mark-up" prices. Highly unedifying for the Gentiles, in whose area the trading took place. St George's launching a Planned Giving Campaign many years ago by featuring the richest member of the congregation, or aggressive use of Gift Aid envelopes or the collection plate, along with sales in church, might be criticised on similar grounds...though perhaps with less justification.

A wider interpretation of what Jesus said and did takes in the gap between formal worship and actual life style; and the exclusiveness of a Temple meant to reflect a God who loved and embraced the whole of human kind. Open-hearted Prayer, and Forgiveness, are advocated in Jesus' fig tree sermon – messages Jesus repeated many times – and this may well be part of the message about something greater than the Temple replacing the Temple.

All faiths at all times have to be on guard lest religious practices become detached from a living faith, and even speak against it and undermine it. Temple worship incurred risks. So did synagogue worship, and house church worship.

The prayer moving mountains passage merits further thought. The picture language of "moving mountains" was in fairly common use then as now. It isn't, of course, about altering the topography: literally praying mountains into the sea, for whatever reason, could cause huge damage and indeed great loss of life. Nor is Jesus saying that if you can kid yourself that it will happen, you can get whatever you want. Taking it to the Lord in prayer does ask for some measure of faith, but that faith must be in the context of trusting God to do what is right and best, not trusting Him to back up your view of what is right and best.

Sorry if that sounds a bit like saying that prayer gets God to do what God was going to do anyway! Rather think of a conversation with God and a partnership with God. There may be better ways of saying this?

The exchange with the Temple authorities seems a bit odd to us. They want this man dead, but they are knocked off course by a smart reply? There are a number of things to keep in mind. The Temple authorities/Sanhedrin were not all of one mind, on anything. They were split on relations with the Roman occupiers, but in practice they were left to do their thing only so long as they managed to keep a lid on unrest, especially at Passover time. Rulers who didn't like each other, and were not liked by the people, being tolerated by the hugely unpopular Romans. A very uneasy situation.. and Caiaphas was all too right about the blood bath possibilities if things went wrong. John the Baptist had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, so if John had been a true prophetic voice..... Although Jesus was not showing Himself to be the nationalistic Messiah that many in the crowd (and maybe John to some extent?) wanted.

You can't help feeling that just as the Disciples must have been just a bit nervous that Jesus' death talk was for real, some at least of the Temple authorities who weren't already secretly signed up with Jesus were just a bit nervous that this might indeed be the Messiah.