

Palm Sunday – 25 March 2018 – Mark 11–12

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 118:1, 19–26

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

his steadfast love endures for ever!

Open to me the gates of righteousness,

that I may enter through them

and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;

the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me

and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected

has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing;

it is marvellous in our eyes.

Save us (Hosanna!), we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

Mark 11:1 – 12:44

As Jesus and his disciples were approaching Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of them ahead to fetch a donkey, as he had pre-arranged. Jesus rode the donkey into the city. People spread branches on the road and were shouting,

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna!'



When Jesus entered Jerusalem it was already late. He went straight to the temple and had a quick look around before heading back to Bethany, a village near Jerusalem. Next morning, Jesus was hungry, and seeing a fig tree, he went to see whether there was some fruit on it, but found nothing but leaves. He said to the tree, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.'

Again he went to the temple and began overturning the tables of the money-changers and those who sold doves. He rebuked them, quoting from Isaiah the prophet, ‘ “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” but you have made it a den of robbers.’ When the chief priests and the scribes heard about it, they were furious and looked for a way to kill him. When evening came, Jesus and his disciples again went out of the city. Next morning, Peter noticed that the fig tree Jesus had cursed was withered away to its roots and he pointed it out to Jesus.



When Jesus next came into the temple, the chief priests, scribes and elders came up to him and asked, ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ Refusing to answer, Jesus instead asked them a question, ‘Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?’ They were unsure what to reply and so eventually answered, ‘We do not know.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’

Jesus then spoke a parable to the gathered crowd about them. ‘A man planted a vineyard, leased it to tenants and went away. When the season for grapes came, the owner sent a slave to the tenants to collect his share. But they seized the slave, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. So the owner sent other slaves who they also beat and killed. Finally the owner sent his beloved son, saying, “Surely they will respect my son.” But the tenants plotted together, “This is the heir; let’s kill him and then the vineyard will be ours.” So they seized him, and killed him.



What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read the Scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?’

When the chief priests realised that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest Jesus immediately, but were afraid of the crowd so they left him.

Then various groups came up to Jesus as he was teaching in the temple courts and tried to trap him in what he said.

Some Pharisees and Herodians asked, 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not? Jesus asked them to show him a coin. 'Whose head is this?' They answered, 'The Emperor's.' 'Then give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'



Next, some Sadducees – who did not believe in any form of resurrection – asked him a convoluted question about a woman who ended up marrying seven brothers. 'Whose wife will she be at the resurrection?' Jesus responded by saying that when people are raised from the dead they will no longer marry. He also stressed that God is more interested in the living than the dead.

Then one of the scribes asked, 'Which commandment is the first?' Jesus replied, 'The first and greatest commandment is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The scribe couldn't argue with Jesus' wise answer.



Finally, Jesus asked a question of his own. 'How can the Messiah be the son of David?

For David, writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote:

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' "

So David himself calls him Lord and not his son.

Jesus was watching people making their offerings at the temple treasury. Many rich people put in large amounts. Then a widow came and put in two small copper coins. He said to the disciples, 'I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those others. For they have given out of their abundance, but out of her poverty she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'



MESSAGE – Jesus in Jerusalem

Today is the day when churches typically remember **Jesus' entry into Jerusalem** riding on a donkey while the crowds waved palm branches – at least in our popular imagination. Many Christians then jump immediately over to the passion narrative and the events of Good Friday and Easter.



But since we are working our way through the whole of Mark's Gospel, we need to remind ourselves Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday lies **five chapters** before the ending of Mark's story on the morning of Easter Sunday. So there is actually a lot more of this drama to play out than we typically hear in our Lectionary readings. The experience and events surrounding Jesus in this last turbulent week in Jerusalem changed forever our understanding of messiahship and of God's deep love for humanity.

A brief recap of Mark's story so far ... John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. He was arrested for proclaiming a provocative message and later executed by King Herod, a foretaste of what awaits Jesus. From early in the story, certain groups have been offended by Jesus' message and have been quietly plotting to destroy him. Three times Jesus has predicted that he would be rejected, suffer and be killed ... though the disciples clearly do not understand what all this means.



Despite the growing sense of conflict and doom hanging in the air, Jesus nevertheless continues towards Jerusalem. His provocative actions in the temple appear to be the catalyst for what follows. He is either very foolish – which seems unlikely – or he deliberately pokes the priestly bear.

In this section of the story, the disciples fade into the background, only making short cameo appearances. The focus of the story is closely on Jesus and his interactions with various opponents. The chapters describing what Jesus does in Jerusalem over several days are nearly as long as the passion account ... so clearly Mark saw these events as important, not just for their teaching content but also for the development of the story.

I want to highlight three aspects of this part of the story ...

First is the **identity of Jesus**. You may recall from a few weeks ago the turning point in the story when Jesus asked who the crowds thought he was. The response was that most people viewed Jesus as a **prophet**. When Jesus asks the disciples the same question, Peter replies that Jesus is the **Messiah** or **King**, sometimes referred to in the psalms as **God's Son**.



Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey reinforces the kingly or messianic view. Jesus seems to deliberately act out a prophecy from Zechariah that calls on Jerusalem to rejoice as her **king** comes, humble and riding on a donkey, just as King David had done centuries before. The shouts of the crowd – Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! – are taken from Psalm 118 where a victorious kingly

figure enters the Jerusalem temple to offer thanks to God.

But Jesus is also presented as a **prophet** who openly criticises the temple authorities – the priests – and calls people back to true worship of God. The odd episode with the fig tree is part of this critique – it has leaves but no fruit – like the temple that looks good but does not deliver the fruit God is searching for. Like a true prophet, Jesus is seen by the temple authorities as an unwelcome voice that must be silenced.



In the parable of the vineyard, Jesus again presents himself as **God's Son**, the Messiah. The vineyard is a common metaphor for Israel in the Scriptures, with God as the owner of the vineyard. So in this parable, the tenants are the leaders of Israel and the slaves who are killed are the prophets. Jesus is the beloved Son of the owner – hence God's Son – linking back to the voice at Jesus' baptism and at

the transfiguration that both named Jesus as **God's beloved Son**. His presence and his message disturb the leaders of Israel, who act to arrest and kill Jesus, much like the prophets before him.

In the final exchange when Jesus questions how the Messiah can be seen as David's son when David calls him **Lord**, Jesus is suggesting something more. He is David's **Lord**, a title for God, who will rule at God's right hand. This is another indication that Jesus is more than he appears, a belief that will be reinforced during the events of Easter.

These identity questions matter to Mark, who encourages us to join the dots and decide for ourselves who we think this Jesus is.

*If Jesus is a **prophet**, will we listen to and act on his teaching?*

*If a **king**, will we seek to obey his rule?*

*And if **Lord**, will we worship him?*

A second discipleship theme in this section is the idea of **fruitfulness** and **faithfulness**. The unfortunate fig tree is **fruitless** – like the nation of Israel as a whole – and so is cursed. In the parable of the vineyard, the tenants are **faithless**. Both are reflections on the priesthood and leadership of Israel – who reject the prophetic call to Israel to be a light to the nations and who will shortly reject God's Son. In asking whether it is legal to pay taxes to Caesar, they demonstrate that they are more concerned with satisfying the demands of **Caesar** than in following the ways of **God**.



The outcome Jesus predicts for the priestly group – and for the nation – is not good. The fig tree withers and dies and the tenants of the vineyard are destroyed with the vineyard given to others. These images may point ahead to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD – proving Jesus correct. In his provocative action in the temple, and his words of prophetic judgment, Jesus threatens the priestly power base. It's little wonder, then, why the Chief Priests dislike Jesus so much and want to silence him permanently.

But in this section there is also the contrast of **faithfulness**. What is the first and greatest commandment? To Love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And the second commandment is similar – love your neighbour as yourself.

If anyone wants to live a faithful life, then **live like this**.

As an example of faithfulness, Mark tells us the story of the poor widow. She may contribute far less to the temple treasury than other richer people, but Jesus commends her for her generous and sacrificial giving. She has counted the cost of discipleship and demonstrates great faith in God to provide for her needs.



Once again, Mark is offering examples to later followers of Jesus like us.

Will we follow the example of generosity and trust like the widow and love God and neighbour with all our heart and strength, or will we be careful to protect our own interests and our own kingdom like the priestly clan?

The choice is stark and the choice is costly. One way leads to abundant fruitfulness like in the parable of the sower, while the other way leads to stunted growth and lack of fruitfulness.

The third aspect of these readings, as always, is just **where do we fit into the Gospel story** which lies at the heart of our Christian faith?

- Do we cheer with the crowd waving palm branches, somewhat oblivious to all that's going on underneath?
- Do we ponder Jesus' true identity? ... or question his authority?
- Do we ask Jesus insightful questions or ridiculous ones, as a means of gaining wisdom or perhaps as a distraction to keep us from grappling with what it will mean for us to follow this enigmatic man from Galilee?

I want to finish with a prayer by Ruth Harvey. It's entitled 'Lead us on our journey'. I invite you to close your eyes and let God's Spirit speak to you ...

God,
you have called us to be a people on the move,
travelling light, ready to lose ourselves for the sake of the world.

You have called us to be a people with a **purpose**,
travelling to where we are led, sustained by your Spirit,
committed to the gospel as the hope of the world.

You have called us to be the church, your **people**.

But we are a church with problems:

too dull for the young, too old and tired for mission,
too unsure of our message to speak to the world.

Move us on our journey

from **where** we are to where **you** want us to be,

so that we become a community

where all are welcomed and no one is excluded,

all are valued and no one is made to feel unwanted,

all are built up and no one is put down.

Lead us on our journey

from **who** we are to who **you** want us to be,

so that patience is built into us,

gentleness becomes part of us,

compassion flows from us,

truth is second nature to us

and the commitment to love is written on our hearts and lips.

Let us go boldly together on the journey towards Easter –
the journey towards death and resurrection.

Let us journey in the peace and power of God's Spirit. Amen.