

Mark 11:1-26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 11 verses 1 to 26 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it to me.

If anyone says to you, Why are you doing this? Say, The Lord has need of it, and will send it back here immediately. And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it.

And some of those standing there said to them, What are you doing untying the colt? And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it.

And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest! And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

[1 : 1 5] On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 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. And he said to it, May no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem, and he entered the temple, and began to drive out those who sold, and those who bought in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the money changers, and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them, and saying 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 robbers. And the chief priests and the scribes heard it, and were seeking a way to destroy him. For they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

[2 : 1 2] And when evening came, they went out of the city. As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

And Jesus answered them, Have faith in God. 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.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 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.

In Mark chapter 11, Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem. We've been moving to this point for a number of chapters now. And now, the events of the final week of his life are about to take place.

In Genesis chapter 49, verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah, The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and the obedience of the peoples is his.

[3 : 25] Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grapes. Later on, as we read in the story of 1 Samuel, Saul's rise to the throne of Israel is set in motion by the wandering donkeys of his father Kish, and his quest to locate the lost donkeys leads him to the prophet Samuel, who anoints him with oil, and lists a series of signs that will confirm his message to Saul as he travels back.

One of these signs is that he will be met by two men declaring that the donkeys have been found. The association of donkeys and mules with rule and kingship in Israel, which we first see in Genesis chapter 49, is seen throughout its history, from Judges in chapter 5 verses 10, and 10 verse 4, 12 verse 14, and then later on in passages such as 2 Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, where as David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, Zebo brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride on.

In an ironic twist, Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. Later on we see again, in 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40, the fraught situation surrounding royal succession, as David's death draws near, is resolved as Solomon is decisively distinguished as the true heir, as he goes in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

So the donkey or the mule is the king's steed. It's associated with peaceful rule, while the horse was an animal of war. A different sort of triumphal entry occurs in the story of Jehu, who is secretly anointed by Elisha and rides on a carpet of people's garments.

He's not a meek ruler riding on a donkey, but he's a furious charioteer, and someone who causes a lot of bloodshed. He kills Joram of Israel, Ahaziah of Judah, he tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet, and he cleanses the temple of Baal in a very bloody manner.

[5 : 32] When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified as riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, and his mode of rule is distinguished from that of the rulers on their great horses and their royal chargers.

Zechariah chapter 9 verses 9 to 10 reads, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation as he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations, his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.

Now this passage is not explicitly cited in Mark, as it is in Matthew or John, but it is clearly in the background. The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter.

He's the one who will establish the kingdom. He's the greater than Saul, the greater son of David. He will realise the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name, and calling to be the prince of peace.

[6 : 42] He will not be like the warlike Jehu, the chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off, and the nations will have peace declared to them. Jesus then is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship.

Throughout Mark's gospel, themes of kingship have been prominent, and they really come to the foreground here. Mark's account differs from Matthew's in the timing of events here, it seems, as the cleansing of the temple appears to happen on the following day.

There are three visits to the temple, punctuated by two passages concerning the fig tree. The interspersing of these accounts strongly suggests a connection between the fig tree and the temple.

The fig tree is Jesus' one destructive miracle. The fig tree is seen in leaf, it seems to promise some life, but it's not the season for figs. Jesus might be expecting undeveloped figs though.

Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13 When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

[7 : 47] Micah 7 verses 1 to 6 Woe is me, for I have become, as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned. There is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires.

The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind. They all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net. Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well.

The prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul. Thus they weave it together. The best of them is like a briar, the most upright of them a thorn hedge.

The day of your watchmen, of your punishment has come. Now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a neighbour, have no confidence in a friend. Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms.

For the son treats the father with contempt. The daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies are the men of his own house.

[8 : 47] The desire to find figs on this tree seems to be strange as it's out of season, and Mark underlines that fact. The point, however, is not the fig tree itself. It's what the fig tree represents.

The fig tree represents Israel and its temple and its leaders, and it's that that Christ has come to inspect. This is followed by Jesus' cleansing of the temple. In Zechariah chapter 14, verse 21, We're told, And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them, and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them, and there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

Jesus' action is the action of the messianic king. He's the one who's going to set right and restore and reform the worship of God. He's going to re-establish the temple in its proper manner.

And his action with the fig tree interprets the action of the temple. Jesus is inspecting the temple as he inspected the fig tree, and the temple will suffer the same judgment.

It will wither and be destroyed in the same way as the fig tree. Jesus' statement concerning the temple is also working with the Old Testament. Isaiah chapter 56, verses 6 to 7, And then in Jeremiah chapter 7, verse 11, Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?

[10 : 34] Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. So there are a number of overlapping judgments here. There's the judgment implied by the fig tree being inspected and no good fruit being found upon it.

In the same way, the people of Israel, their leaders have been inspected, and they have not produced the fruit that is being sought. Then there is also the background of Zechariah chapter 14, the final verse of that book, which speaks of the removal of the traders from the house of the Lord.

Beyond that, there's also Jeremiah. Jeremiah, which speaks about the rebellion of the people and the way that they treated the temple as a sort of talisman to protect them from God's wrath.

It was a shelter and a refuge, so they could sin, and the temple would secure their impunity. Like robbers retreat to their den after they've committed their crimes, so the people of Israel would retreat to the temple, to the house of God itself, and treat that as a place that protected them from judgment, from being sought out by justice.

This is an utter perversion of the true purpose of the temple. It's not to be a place of merchandise. It's not to be a place to avoid the just judgment of God. And it's not to be a place that is fruitless.

[11 : 48] Rather, it's supposed to be the place where the spiritual life of Israel is most evident, where the leaves, as it were, of this house display the fruit within it. And then it's also to be a place that brings in people from outside, that for all nations it should be seen as a house of prayer.

The judgment on the fig tree, then, is a symbolic judgment upon the temple and Jerusalem. In Mark's account, then, it frames Jesus' action in the temple. The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit.

Jeremiah 8, verse 13, chapter 24, verses 1 to 10, Hosea 9, 10, and 16 to 17, all use that sort of symbolism to refer to Israel.

The temple and the fig tree are related, then. And then Jesus, after this, goes into a discussion of prayer, about efficacy in prayer, the importance of faith, but also forgiveness.

If we want effective prayers, we have to come to God with faith and confidence, but also in a way that heals the relationships that we have with others, the breached relationships, the bitterness that might exist between us and others.

[12 : 57] And unless we come to God with the faith to grasp hold of him, and the forgiveness to release our neighbour from their debts, we cannot enjoy effectiveness in prayer.

A question to consider, why do you think Mark focuses Jesus' teaching on prayer here rather than elsewhere in his gospel, as the other gospels do?