

Text: Mark 11:1-26

Theme: The Servant King Enters Jerusalem-The Place of His Death

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 04/02/2018 at 10.30am

Introduction: From the beginning of Mark's gospel, Mark wants us to interrogate the question, "Who is Jesus?" How can anyone really explain or understand Jesus Christ except through what he did and taught? First, there is the mystery of explaining how one Man could be fully God and fully human at the same time. There was Jesus the Teacher, who taught with authority even at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41f) and all through His adult life. There was Jesus the Healer, who healed the sick in body and soul, curing their deformities and casting out their demons. There was Jesus the Preacher, who drew great crowds of people to hear Him speak words which lodged directly in the human heart. There was Jesus the Scholar, who knew the law intimately, even as He changed its letter to uphold its spirit. There was Jesus the skilled Craftsman, who spent the first thirty years of His life as a carpenter's son. There was Jesus the Friend of the despised and downtrodden, Jesus the friend of women, Jesus the lover of children, I could go on and on. These are just a few aspects of the character and personality of the Man from Nazareth named Jesus.

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do you have that palm branch, dad?" "You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved Palm Branches to honour him, so we got Palm Branches today." The little boy replied, "The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

Today we are looking at how the Servant King made his way to Jerusalem, the place he knew suffering and death awaited him. You just wonder how determined he was to lift the burden and death from us by dying in our place.

I have to state from the onset that this was not the first time Jesus would be coming to Jerusalem – an impression given by the 3 Synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are primarily concerned with the work of Jesus in Galilee and have so much of His three years' work to pack into their writings. So, they had to concentrate on what their focus was and that to which they had knowledge. When we read John's gospel, which concentrated on Jesus' Judean ministry, we find Jesus frequently in Jerusalem. John 2:13, 5:1, 7:10.

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, for Passion Week, in the last great section of Mark's gospel, chapters 11-16. Mark's emphasis, as Jesus enters the 'lion's den' where He will lay down His life for the sins of the world, is to magnify the worth of Christ. A crucified Messiah was unthinkable for a Jew. That Jesus would end up hanging from a cross as a criminal - a place of ignominy and shame - created a huge stumbling block for first-century people accepting the gospel.

Mark wants to remind us, before Jesus arrives at Golgotha, that the man who will hang in shame on that centre cross is a person of inestimable worth. A.W. Tozer said, **'The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian church today is to purify and elevate her concept of Christ until it is once more worthy of Him.'**

Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a colt is intentionally fulfilling Zechariah's messianic prophecy, 'Rejoice greatly ... Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you' (Zech. 9:9). Jesus is deliberately proclaiming Himself the Messiah-King, the fulfilment of all those Old Testament prophecies that point to God's chosen servant who would sit on David's

throne, usher in a worldwide kingdom of peace and righteousness, and judge the nations. He is a humble king, gently riding a donkey - a king who is about to lay down His life - but His humility should not hide His universal kingship.

The whole impact is that the King was coming in peace. In Palestine, the donkey or young horse was not a despised animal, but a noble one. When a king went to war he rode on a horse, when he came in peace he rode on a donkey.

Let us get into the first section of our reading for today: **Mark 11 :1-11 – The Servant King Enters Jerusalem - The Place of His Death.**

Mark emphasizes Jesus' sovereignty. He is able to supernaturally direct His disciples to find the unbroken colt on which the King will ride into Jerusalem (vv. 2-6). When the disciples were questioned about taking the colt, they say, 'The Lord needs it'. The title Lord here is the same used for God.

Now, He enters the city. There is a huge crowd making its way to Jerusalem for the Passover. And there is Jesus, riding on a donkey. People are singing His praises and throwing palms before Him. The high priests and the Roman soldiers are watching. The modern church has taken the donkey as a symbol of the meekness and humility of Jesus, and so it was. Jesus said more than once that He came to serve, not to be served. But to the Jews of Jesus' day, the donkey had a double meaning - it was also a symbol of kingship. The old Testament prophets had said that the Messiah would come riding on a donkey (**Zechariah 9:9-10**); they had also said He would appear at the very city gate Jesus was entering (Joel 3:1-12). Jesus knew full well that by coming to Jerusalem in this way and at this time, He was using the symbolism of a king, even a Messiah. He knew full well what this symbol would mean in the super-charged atmosphere of Jerusalem.

In the days of Jesus, some Rabbis reconciled these by saying that the Messiah would come humbly to an unworthy Israel but mightily to a worthy Israel. Since Israel considered itself worthy, they only looked for a triumphant, conquering Messiah. This is one of the reasons they got it all wrong and missed the time of their visitation.

And many spread their clothes on the road, and others cut down leafy branches from the trees and spread them on the road: We like this slice from the life of Jesus because it simply *feels* so right. For much of Jesus' ministry, He was despised and rejected of men. Often the adoring crowds followed Him only for what they could *get* from Him, and most of His audience rejected any kind of personal commitment to Jesus. All of that was different on that day.

They lavished attention and honour on Jesus. They used their clothes as a saddle for Jesus and as a red carpet for the colt He rode on. Considering the expense and value of clothing in those days, this was generous praise.

Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" For most of His ministry, Jesus did everything He could to *discourage* people from publicly celebrating Him as the Messiah. Here Jesus went out of His way to invite public praise and adoration as the Messiah. Jesus is the Sovereign Lord, and the Messiah-King. To borrow Luke's version of the triumphal entry, 'if we don't worship him, the very stones will cry out in worship.' (Luke 19:40)

But notice the anti-climax in this passage. After all the palm-branch waving and cloak-spreading for the messianic King, we're told that when Jesus finally got to the Temple in

Jerusalem 'it was already late' (v. 11). The triumphal entry is followed by a quiet retreat back home as all the crowds have dispersed.

Is Mark telling us something about the danger of hysteria? These same crowds who cheered, within a week will be shouting 'Crucify Him!' **Do we still follow Jesus when the music fades, the big event is over, and life is either dull or full of frustrations? Are you purifying and elevating your concept of Jesus? Do you follow Him when the excitement has died down?**

A picture paints a thousand words. Mark gives us a picture (v. 11) of the Jewish Messiah 'looking around at everything' in the Jewish Temple. He uses a strong verb meaning literally 'to scrutinise' or 'stare intently at'. Verse 11 introduces the next three chapters (11-13), all situated around the Temple precincts, where the Lord of the Temple will scan His eye over corrupt Jewish religion. What does he see? What is the image being projected and what is the reality on ground? If the scrutinising eyes of the Lord are focussed on you, what will Jesus see? It all begins with the strange account of Jesus cursing the fig tree (vv. 12-14).

The lesson of the fig tree - Image versus Reality (Verses 12-14)

This story has troubled many people, including the atheist Bertrand Russell who felt it was a sign of unworthy anger. But the fig tree episode, where Jesus withers the tree for its unfruitfulness, is a picture of Jesus' judgement of Jerusalem's unfruitful Temple, and the false worship that pervaded Jewish society.

Mark tells the story in his typical sandwich format; verses 12 to 14 and 20 to 21 tell about the fig tree, and the meat in the sandwich (vv. 15-19) sees Jesus turning over the tables of the sellers who were degrading the holy Temple by turning it into a market stall for merchandise. Is Mark telling us that we seek money more than we seek God, and make it our idol? The tallest building in the London skyline 100 years ago was St Paul's Cathedral. Today the cathedral is dwarfed by the giant towers of Canary Wharf in London's financial district. Does that not show us where we place our priorities? Our finances matter more to us than God does.

Essentially, the tree was a picture of false advertising, having leaves but no figs. Ordinarily this is not the case with these fig trees, which normally do not have leaves without also having figs. It was not the season for figs: It wasn't that the fig tree didn't have figs because it wasn't supposed to. The problem is that it *had leaves* but didn't have figs. The leaves said, "There are figs here," but the figs weren't there.

There were many trees with only leaves, and these were not cursed. There were many trees with neither leaves nor fruit, and these were not cursed. This tree was cursed because it professed to have fruit but did not.

The tree was cursed for its **pretence** of leaves, not for its **lack** of fruit. Like Israel in the days of Jesus, it had the outward form but no fruit. In this picture, Jesus warned Israel – and us – of God's displeasure when we have the *appearance* of fruit but not the fruit itself. God isn't pleased when His people are all leaves and no fruit.

In all works in the ministry of Jesus, this is the only destructive miracle. The Old Testament is filled with miracles of destruction and judgment, but Jesus most perfectly showed us the nature of God. If this was the only miracle of its kind, we must see there was a great and important lesson in it. God doesn't approve when there is profession without reality, talk without walk.

Verses 15-19. The Temple Cleansed.

Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple: The temple area was filled with profiteers who worked in cooperation with the priests and robbed the pilgrims by forcing them to purchase approved sacrificial animals and currencies at inflated prices.

Every Jewish male had to pay a yearly temple tax – an amount equalling about two days' pay. It had to be paid in the currency of the temple, and the money exchangers made the exchange into temple money at outrageous rates. They did this in the outer courts of the temple, the only area where Gentiles could worship and pray. Therefore, this place of prayer was made into a marketplace, and a dishonest one at that. God intended the temple to be a **house of prayer for all nations**, but they had made it a **den of thieves**. Another case of Image contrasting Reality.

This is a side of Jesus we don't think about very often, we who want to keep Jesus meek and mild and "apolitical!" He picks up a whip and drives out the moneychangers: "My Father's house shall be a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of thieves!" (Mark 11:17). Then, because of the uproar He has caused, Jesus slips out to Bethany for the night, a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

Jesus has antagonized both the Roman political leaders and the Jewish religious leaders. He has united them in opposition to Him. If they feared or disliked Him before, now they want Him dead. Jesus knows that regardless of what He does or fails to do, the world is going to put Him to death, one way or the other. He knows the Scripture: **The Messiah must be "wounded for our transgression and bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5).** He knows that a world which has rejected God's love and God's law and followed its own bloody course through all of human history isn't going to have a sudden change of heart. The Son of God must die to give people a new heart. What wonderful love Jesus shows – And this love demands a response from you.

Verses 20-24. Return to the cursed fig tree. Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

Have faith in God: Jesus explained that this miracle was really the result of a prayer made in faith, and He encouraged His marvelling disciples to have this kind of faith, trusting that God would hear them also. Jesus made it clear that prayer must be offered in faith, and faith must be **in God**. Faith is trust, confidence, and reliance upon someone or something.

Jesus calls us away from false idols to seek the Father with all our hearts, most fervently expressed in faithful prayer (vv. 22-25). Jesus emphasizes believing prayer. He is not suggesting the 'name it and claim it' theology of prosperity teachers, but seriously challenging us that asking God for things we don't think He can do is idolatrous.

Whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed": Mountain was a popular figure of speech, a common Jewish phrase, for any insurmountable problem; Jesus said that as we believe, God could overcome any obstacle. **This promise of God's answer to the prayer made in faith was made to disciples, not to the multitude.** "Nor should we interpret Mark 11:24 to mean, 'If you pray hard enough and really believe, God is obliged to answer your prayer no matter what you ask.' That kind of faith is not faith in God; rather it is nothing but faith in faith, or faith in feelings." (Wiersbe)

Verses 25-26. Prayer and forgiveness. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him: A lack of faith is not the only obstacle to effective prayer. Refusing to forgive or holding on to bitterness can also hinder our prayer. The point may also be that this is an area where we need great faith. Sometimes a hard and unforgiving heart is bigger than any mountain. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone: This means that we are never to place religious duty or ministry ahead of good relationships with people. We are to set things right first, and then continue in prayer. We are to do what Paul commanded in Romans 12:18: *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*

The forgiven heart will forgive others. If we have hard, unforgiving hearts, it calls into question if we have ever received or appreciated the forgiveness God offers us.