

Fig trees, Faith and Forgiveness

Mark Chapter 11 verses 20-33

I have divided the passage into different sections, starting with

The Lesson from the cursing of the Fig Tree, which is also found in Matthew's gospel. We will read the account of the cursing of the fig tree once again to remind ourselves of the event that took place.

Mark Chapter 11 verses 12-14, followed by verses 20-24

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 the disciples heard it.

When I first read this passage some years ago I wondered (as I know many of you have) why Jesus would cause a healthy tree to wither away. However, at least part of the answer is to be found in verses 20-24.

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 have cursed has withered.

Jesus answered the disciples with the following words: "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."

Before we go any further I will ask one question: Do you think that absolutely everything we ask in prayer will be given to us if we believe that it will?

According to the commentary written by Morna D Hooker entitled, "The Gospel according to St Mark," this is the only negative miracle in the gospels. It is even dismissed by some writers as being out of character for Jesus but is like some miracles found in the apocryphal gospels. Morna Hooker believes that

the fig tree represents Israel, which had failed to produce the appropriate fruits when the Messiah looked for them. Some passages from the Old Testament seem to uphold this symbolism.

Micah Chapter 7 verse 1:

“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.”

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. We touched on this during the session Chris led. Jesus hoped to find genuine faith, love, obedience and service for God but did not find “such fruit in Israel”

In addition, I would suggest that Jesus was using the incident- the cursing of the fig tree to teach the disciples more about himself and about the nature of faith at a time when his ministry as “the son of man” on earth was coming to an end and they would be given the Holy Spirit to empower them and entrust them with the task of spreading the news of the gospel and ministering to others in need after his ascension to Heaven.

In Acts Chapter 3 verses 1-8, Peter and John certainly needed the kind of faith that moves mountains, as they said to a lame man: “In the name of Jesus rise up and walk.” The lame man did just that and praised God with enthusiasm!

**Have you ever had any experiences where you have had to exercise great faith?**

The parable of the barren Fig Tree found in Luke Chapter 13 verses 6-9 seems to tell us that we should bear fruit as Christians. What do you think?

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking for fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vine dresser. “Look for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I found none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig round it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Are there any differences between this parable and Jesus's actual encounter with a fig tree? If so why do you think this is?

### Forgiveness Mark 11 Verses 25-26

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; highlights the importance of forgiveness.

I don't know if any of you have ever felt that the "victim" seems to have two problems, firstly the problem and pain etc that needs forgiving and secondly, being obliged to forgive whereas some perpetrators feel no remorse or pain. It sometimes seems unfair. Sometimes with "big issues" I feel that people need time to help them to forgive.

Here are a couple of incidents that deal with forgiveness:-

### The Attempted Assassination of Pope John Paul 2<sup>nd</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1981 as the Polish Pope was passing through the thousands of people that had gathered at St Peter's Square where he was blessing them from his open pope mobile four gun shots were fired at close range. The pope collapsed as the bullets hit him. The 60 year old pope was then rushed to a hospital where he had emergency surgery and treatment and after some time made a complete recovery.

The assassination attempt was made by a Turkish citizen called Mehmet Ali Ağca. On the Sunday, after the shooting the Pope recorded a message from his hospital bed, asking people to pray for the man who tried to kill him and referred to him as his brother. He also offered his sincere forgiveness to Mehmet. Later, when the Pope had recovered he visited him in prison and asked the authorities to grant him a pardon and had him released.

Once released, Mehmet was deported to Turkey where he spent a 10 year sentence in prison for a crime he had committed previously in Turkey. He was barred from ever returning to Italy. However, when Pope John Paul died in 2005 he made a clandestine visit to the grave.

In May of 2007 he was reported to have said that he had decided to renounce his Muslim faith and become a Catholic.

We can see with regard to the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul the act of forgiveness caused a criminal to think about his actions and to repent and also freed the Pope from feelings of bitterness that could have weighed heavily on him for the rest of his life.

Sometimes fairly insignificant events “crop up” but need forgiveness to prevent lasting resentment and problems.

Some years ago I was short of money and so in addition to teaching I worked as a cleaner of aeroplanes at week-ends. I worked at Gatwick Airport and crews of cleaners of all ages up to retirement age cleared rubbish from seats, cleaned toilets and work surfaces.

On one occasion, because of staff shortages, I had to lead a crew of cleaners and this involved taking equipment up into the aircraft. I asked one girl aged around eighteen to carry the vacuum cleaner to the plane. You would have thought that some act of great injustice had taken place as she grumbled and stomped her way to the plane. She was just about to carry the equipment up the steps when I told her that as she had carried it from the Crew’s office to the bottom of the steps I would carry it into the plane.

Her attitude suddenly changed. She was co-operative during the cleaning that took place. She even thanked me later for a “good” morning which I took to be her way of apologising and I smiled and all was well and no resentment was felt.

Does anyone want to give us their experiences?

[The Authority of Jesus challenged Mark 11 verse 27-33](#)

And they came to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me,” And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, “From heaven, he will say, “Why then did you not believe him? But shall we say, “From man?” - they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Having read this short passage I am filled with admiration for the way in which Jesus, answered the priests, scribes and elders which has inspired me to pray for more wisdom. He knew they had set a trap for him and he knew how to avoid it without causing contention.

If the religious leaders had taken notice of Zechariah’s words in chapter 9 verse 9 they could have realized that the prophet’s prophecy had been fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. Here are the words of Zechariah:

“Say to the daughters of Zion,

Behold your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.

Does anyone want to make a comment about the matter?