

## The Importance of Being Real

You will remember that last week's Scripture showed Jesus setting His face toward Jerusalem. He was committed to travel this last and most important part of His earthly journey. It's interesting that of the 16 chapters of Mark's gospel, 6 1/2 chapters are dedicated to this part of Jesus' ministry, and a whole 5 chapters are given to the week before His death.

The first 10 verses of our Scripture passage this morning are dedicated to what we normally refer to as the Triumphal Entry, and we will keep these verses in reserve until Palm Sunday. It is sufficient for our purposes today to note that having come down the Jordan river valley from Galilee, Jesus goes through Jericho which sits 13 or 14 miles to the North and East of Jerusalem. At Jericho He restored sight to blind Bartimaeus and then moved on toward Jerusalem with a large following. Many had heard Him teach and some had seen His miracles. All heard of the wonderful things Jesus said and had done over the three-three and a half years of His ministry. And now that He had obviously set His sights on the Holy City of Jerusalem, expectations were running high; all eyes were upon Him.

Following His carefully staged entrance into the city, which we will say more about on our own Palm Sunday, Mark 11:11 tells us, "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

With these few words, Mark whets our appetite for action to follow. If we were reading or hearing the story for the first time we would know that Jesus has decided to take some kind of action the following day, but we wouldn't know what that might be. Our curiosity would cause us to read on or to listen intently to find out what Jesus is going to do. Something big is brewing.

Once again, if we were reading or hearing the story for the first time, verses 12-14 would perhaps seem like an unnecessary diversion. We want to get back to the temple and see what Jesus is going to do in or with the temple. Why do we have to bother with the fact that Jesus is hungry and makes a visit to a fig tree? What does a fig tree have to do with Jesus' mission in Jerusalem? Nevertheless, Mark 11:12-14 say: "The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the

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distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it."

I don't know about you, but about now, I'm feeling sympathy for the fig tree. After all it wasn't the right season for figs. The tree couldn't help having no fruit any more than it could help bringing forth leaves in response to natural forces. Jesus' act of cursing the fig tree seems petty. Is Jesus just cranky because He's hungry? Is the pressure of knowing what's going to happen to Him in Jerusalem getting to Him? Why does He curse the fig tree? Well, I'm going to let that question unanswered for just a bit longer, because I think this is how these verses are meant to effect us. They are here in the story to build dramatic tension and to plant the question "why?" in our heads. Mark wants us to be wondering about the fig tree as we follow Jesus back to the temple. So, let's see what comes next.

Verses 15-19 say, "On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city."

Mark 11:15-19 show us a side of Jesus we don't see very often. I sometimes tell people that I don't get mad very often but that they don't want to see me when I do. That's magnified many times when referring to Jesus. I don't ever want to see Jesus angry and I especially never want to see Him angry at me. But here in the temple, Jesus is magnificent in His anger. He saw what was going on in the temple yesterday afternoon and Jesus has been thinking about what He saw all night. Maybe that's why He was so short with the fig tree this morning? But, whatever the case, Jesus lets it all out now. He hates what's going on in the temple. The buying and selling, the bargaining, the competition to make a denari, dishonest scales, the bilking of the pilgrims who had come to worship; all of this is highly offensive and infuriating to Jesus. And Jesus knows how to get

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the point across. He comes into the temple like he owns the place--which of course He does--and He proceeds to clean house. He wrecks the kiosks, sends the loan sharks packing, drives out the animals, makes UPS and Fedex take the deliveries back where they came from. His explanation is crisp and filled with authority: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have turned it into a den for thieves!" It was a "take no prisoners" kind of day.

The whole thing leaves us feeling breathless. And then, on the way home back to Bethany, what do we run into? Wow, would you look at that; it's the fig tree we saw this morning and it's deader than a door nail. The leaves have shriveled and fallen off, whatever buds there were are gone, green has turned brown, new shoots that were soft and tender this morning have become brittle. And, if we are paying attention to the structure of the story, we notice that the act of clearing and cleansing the temple is sandwiched or bracketed by the story of the fig tree. On one side of the story of Jesus' words and actions in the temple, the fig tree looks green and promising and on the other side the fig tree is brown and dead. Why does Jesus curse the fig tree? It's sort of like putting a puzzle together, isn't it?

I would maintain this morning that because of where it is mentioned in the story, being mentioned before and after the temple clearing, the fig tree is a parable or object lesson concerning the temple and all that it represents. I would also say that it must be a parable or object lesson because it makes little sense standing alone. We never see Jesus being selfish, petty, or vindictive. As we have said, it wasn't the right season for figs, and it was only a tree after all. Jesus had no cause to curse the fig tree unless the fig tree points to something beyond itself.

And, it seems to me that Jesus is telling us that the Jewish religious establishment in His day had become like the fig tree. It began so full of promise. These were, after all, the chosen people. They had God's word. They had the prophets. They had the religious history. They had the temple. And most importantly of all, they had had the Lord. God Himself had been with them and had shown them His glory. Time and time again the Living God had answered their prayers, forgiven their sins, clothed them and fed them, delivered them from their enemies. They also had a purpose, even to be the light of the world and to bring people from every nation on earth to a knowledge of the Lord.

But time and time again the people of Israel had rebelled against their Lord and turned away to serve other gods. And right there and then in Jerusalem, with the mighty Roman Empire in their midst, they had the greatest opportunity in the world to be and to do what God had called them to be and to do. Had they understood what was going on from God's perspective, they could have shown the Romans God's glory and the Romans would have taken the knowledge of Yahweh to the whole civilized world. But, instead of showing the Romans the greatness and far superior character of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they allowed themselves to become even more corrupt and ruthless than the Romans. Rather than being the good and honest men God had called them to be, they allowed the Romans to see a collection of hucksters, political manipulators, and cheats. Jewish tax collectors to work for the Romans were easy to recruit. The Chief Priests, Pharisees, and scribes, were easy bribe. They would sell out their own people for a few privileges and for a few more shekles. Instead of showing themselves as holy men of God, Israel's finest revealed themselves to be cowards and conniving thieves.

The fig tree Israel, so green and full of promise from a distance, offered no fruit up close. It was good for nothing but to be cut down, dried, and used for firewood. All of this came to pass in 70 A.D., when the Romans, disgusted with rebellions, burned Jerusalem and its temple to the ground. It also speaks to Jesus' ministry on the cross, for in becoming the man for others and offering Himself as a sacrifice of love for all, Jesus did what Israel failed to do: He demonstrated the Heart of His Father for all the world to see.

Now we have something important to do yet this morning, so let us ask the question: What does all of this have to do with us? It's a question of the fig tree isn't it? That is, are we as individual witnesses and are we as a church bearing any fruit? Are we living for God and ministering under God's direction to the point that others are able to see the Love of God living in and ministering through us? Is there any fruit or are we, as they often say of politicians, empty suits? Are we filled with the Holy Spirit or are we just so much "hot air?"--all bluster but no substance?

Well, I think there is always room for improvement, but I had a most wonderful compliment from Chuck Gensamer this past week. I asked Chuck what he liked about our church and he

said, "the people at Fourth Street seem real." He told me about a church he used to attend where he never felt like he belonged and where there was the sense that many of the people were putting on a religious front that wasn't real. I think he was saying that they acted one way in church and quite the opposite after they walked out the church door. They entered the church to pretend and departed the church to offend. The loved they talked about wasn't real. At least that's how it felt.

In one word, Chuck Gensamer has put his finger on our first and most important mission as a church, and that is to be real; it's not about pretending perfection or even becoming perfect--it's all about becoming real in our relationship with God and real in our love for one another. I just want us to always be real in our pursuit of the Lord and genuine in our desire to become more and more like Him. As long as that is our focus we will never be unfruitful.

The people who come now to join with us in church membership have judged us real and I have to feel very good about that and very good about all of you who have passed that test. It tells me that our church has a future, that God is still blessing and plans to use us more and more for His glory. We are not cursed, our leaves will not shrivel, our branches will remain green, our blossoms will not fall without bearing fruit. Please understand the parable of the fig tree!

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**Mark 11:1-25**

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