

Truth for Today

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: The Rejected King - Mark 11

Earlier this year, the world witnessed the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States of America: Barack Obama. We had waited months for this event; thousands of police and soldiers were involved in the security arrangements, millions of dollars had been spent planning and arranging the inauguration. It was watched by tens of millions of people around the world. Quite a contrast to the arrival of Israel's king that we read about in Mark's Gospel chapter 11!

Before we comment let's read the first 11 verses of Mark chapter 11, "Now when they drew near Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples; and He said to them, 'Go into the village opposite you; and as soon as you have entered it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here.' So they went their way, and found the colt tied by the door outside on the street, and they loosed it. But some of those who stood there said to them, 'What are you doing, loosing the colt?' And they spoke to them just as Jesus had commanded. So they let them go. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes on it, and He sat on it. And many spread their clothes on the road, and others cut down leafy branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: 'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve".

We have been reminded many times as we have read through Mark's account of the life of Jesus that He is presented as Jehovah's perfect and faithful servant. He is always urgent and busy in His service for God and men. Now we are drawing towards the last few days before the crucifixion. For the third time in this Gospel the disciples had been told by the Lord Jesus in the previous chapter of His impending betrayal and death. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." Mark 10:33 and 34. Although He knew perfectly what lay ahead of Him at Jerusalem, Jesus didn't turn aside. In Isaiah 50:5-7 the LORD'S Servant says, "I was not rebellious, neither turned I away back...I set My face like a flint". He would not be discouraged!

Now as we open chapter 11, the Lord and His disciples continue their journey towards Jerusalem; they are near Bethphage and Bethany, close to the Mount of Olives. Bethany was the village where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. These three were good friends of Jesus and had always made Him welcome in their home. The Mount of Olives was also a familiar haunt of the Lord and He often went there to pray. But it is also worth noticing in the context of the verses we have read, that the prophet Zechariah tells us in 14:4 that it will be the Mount of Olives to which, in a coming day, the Lord will return in overwhelming glory and majesty to rescue the nation of Israel and rule in Jerusalem. This occasion, however, is a very different arrival for the King but it is also the subject of a prophecy made centuries earlier by Zechariah: "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" Zechariah 9:9. It is difficult to imagine any of today's leaders and rulers being prepared to arrive at their capital city in such a way!

As they get near Jerusalem, the Lord sends two of His disciples into a village to fetch a colt, the foal of a donkey for Him to ride on. It is a miracle, not in the sense of a dramatic supernatural act, but one which demonstrated His omniscience. He knew everything! He knew exactly where the colt would be; He knew that the actions of the two disciples would be questioned and so He prepared the disciples with exactly the right answer that would satisfy the on-lookers. "The Lord has need of it". He also knew the response of the questioner because the Lord Jesus adds, "Immediately he will send it here". Was this un-named owner of the donkey a secret disciple of the Lord Jesus? We are not told, but he was certainly in the right place at the right time with exactly what was necessary to meet the need. How often this same thing has been demonstrated among Christians over the years. God has His people standing ready to assist and provide what is needed, often in unexpected ways.

The narrative continues with the disciples placing their clothes on the donkey and the Lord riding on it as they journey towards Jerusalem. Wherever the Lord Jesus went, He attracted the crowds, and this day was no different. What was

different was the crowd's reaction. Why did they cut down branches to strew in His pathway? Why did they lay down their clothes on the dusty road? I don't know. I have wondered if this was the first time they had seen Jesus riding on a donkey rather than walking. Possibly some in the crowd had remembered Zechariah's prophecy about the king coming on a donkey. As a nation, they were certainly desperate for a leader to deliver them from the rule of Rome. What does it say about fickle human nature that this very crowd who a few days later would call for Jesus to be crucified, cry out, "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'"

Hosanna, save now! Don't delay! And they call down blessings on the Lord Jesus, acknowledging that He had indeed come "in the name of the LORD". Ever since the glorious days of King David, whom God had used to establish the Kingdom of Israel, the nation had looked for other leaders to follow in the same mould. They wanted a ruler who would deliver them from their enemies, the other nations who had been allowed by God to subjugate them, because of the people's disobedience to God. Did they hope that Jesus would be the one? Certainly the Lord's disciples did. We can read of two of them returning home after the crucifixion and telling of their disappointment to the "stranger" who had joined them as they trudged home, "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel." Luke 24:21.

What happened after the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem must have been a huge anticlimax to the crowds. We simply read, "And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve". He didn't make a stirring speech to rally His followers, nor did He call for them to rise up against the Roman oppressors. He just looked round the Temple and left the city for Bethany, and the home where He was always welcome.

Now we shall read the next section. "Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, 'Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.' And His disciples heard it. So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, 'Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.' And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. When evening had come, He went out of the city. 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.' So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have faith in God, for assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.'" Mark 11:12-24.

The story of the fig tree is unique in the history of the Lord's life. Peter, some while later, when speaking to the Roman Cornelius about Jesus, said, "who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" Acts 10:38. The four Gospels are crammed full of remarkable stories of the compassion and kindness of Jesus. We read of His patience and graciousness to all who came to Him, regardless of His own needs. And yet here is recounted for us the story of a fruitless fig-tree that was cursed by the same Jesus. Why? What lessons are we to learn from this incident?

The fig tree was a very common and very productive tree native to the land of Palestine. It is unusual in that it produces fruit before it produces leaves. The LORD in Hosea 9 likens Israel to a fig tree. I think that this all points to the fact that there is to be a difference now in the way God approaches and deals with mankind. Some would call this a change in dispensation a dispensation being a period of time characterised by God's way of acting and His relationship with particular people. We can clearly see that God's relationship with Israel is based on keeping the law, hence a dispensation marked by law. Today God is appealing to mankind on the basis of His free grace, so a dispensation of grace. I think it is right to say that this fig tree was like the nation of Israel at that time, all show and no fruit. Plenty of leaves, but no figs! God had been patient with His special people Israel, He had planted them and nurtured them, but they had been barren in their response to His faithfulness. It was time for a change!

It seems to be in keeping with this that Jesus and His disciples return to the Temple in Jerusalem. The previous evening Jesus had visited the Temple and looked round. Had He found any fruit, anything that pleased Him? I don't think He had! Now the next morning He returns and "began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it a "den of thieves."'"" Mark 11:17. What had once been a revered and holy place had become a place of commerce, a place of profit, not prayer! This sham could not continue, and so the Lord acted in this way. The words of the Psalmist David are recorded in John's account of this story: "The zeal of Your

house has eaten Me up" John 2:17 and Psalm 69:9. It was not an action calculated to win the approval of the religious leaders who had obviously allowed such trade to continue. But the Lord Jesus was only concerned with what pleased God; who else could have said, "I do always those things which please Him". John 8:29?

Yet again the scribes and chief priests sought opportunity to destroy Him. They were so blinded by their jealousy that they never once stopped to consider that they might be wrong. They couldn't see that Jesus was truly "Immanuel", the Messiah they had waited so long for. Nor could they accept that God wanted to bless all nations, not just Israel. The Scripture the Lord quoted was from the book of Isaiah, "My House shall be called a house of prayer for all people" Isaiah 56:7. God's free grace can be hard to accept. We might think that some people, but never ourselves, are just too bad for God's blessing! But God's love and forgiveness are on offer to all.

Again in the evening Jesus leaves Jerusalem with His disciples, presumably to go to Bethany, because as they return to the city in the morning they pass the fig tree that Jesus had cursed and Peter notices that it has completely withered. When Peter calls the Lord's attention to it, Jesus uses the occasion to teach the disciples about faith and prayer. It would seem that as Jesus and His disciples walked between the cities and villages of Israel, Jesus would constantly be using the time to prepare His followers by example and by teaching how they would carry on His ministry after His death and resurrection. First the Lord Jesus says, "Have faith in God". We are told in Ephesians 2:8 that faith is "the gift of God". Here we are told to "Have faith in God". Each of us exercise faith every day. When we step out onto a bridge we are exercising faith that it has been soundly built and will sustain our weight. When we visit a doctor we have faith in his or her ability to help. Sometimes our faith is proved to be misplaced, and we are let down. But here we are told to "Have faith in God" who will never fail or disappoint. He is utterly reliable and trustworthy!

The next two verses are quite remarkable: "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them." Mark 11:23-24. Is there no limit placed here on God's ability to answer prayer? Is this a blank cheque for us to request anything and everything we want? It is certainly a blank cheque, yes, but I do not think we can expect God to fulfil our every whim, nor can we expect God to give us things that are clearly contrary to His Word and His Nature. There is another point to make as well; twice in these two verses we have the word "believe". Elsewhere in this Gospel we have read that Jesus "could there do no mighty work" and the reason given is "because of their unbelief" Mark 6:5-6. When I pray, do I truly believe that what I am asking God for is in keeping with His will, and that I believe He can answer my prayer?

Let's read the final verses of the chapter. "'And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.' Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. And they said to Him, 'By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?' But Jesus answered and said to them, 'I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.' And they reasoned among themselves, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," He will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "From men"' - they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. So they answered and said to Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'" Mark 11:25-33.

First of all, the Lord Jesus adds another requirement to the practice of prayer, and that is forgiveness. Not only must we have faith in God, but we must also exercise forgiveness towards those who may have offended us. We cannot expect God to answer our prayers if we have a hard unforgiving attitude to those around us. For example, Peter in his first epistle gives very direct instruction to husbands as to their attitude towards their wives: "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." 1 Peter 3:7. We simply cannot be wrong in our relationships with those around us and expect God to answer our prayers. When the Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples to pray, He taught them to request forgiveness from God, and they were to forgive others. "And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are indebted to us" Luke 11:4. Elsewhere David said "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear". Psalm 66:18. And an unforgiving spirit is sin!

During their conversation together, Jesus and His disciples have arrived at Jerusalem and have gone back into the Temple. As Jesus was walking in the Temple, He is questioned again by the chief priests, scribes and elders as to His actions the previous day. They said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?" The leaders had been completely outraged by the Lord's actions in the Temple on the previous day. They had secretly been planning His destruction but were afraid of the reaction of the ordinary people. Now they challenge His authority; what right did He have to act in this way? Who did He think He was?

Rather than answer their question directly, Jesus responds by asking them a question. It challenged the sincerity of their request. Did they really want to know and understand, or were they just trying to trip Him up? An honest answer

on their part would have produced a direct answer to their question on the part of the Lord. So Jesus said, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: 'The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.'" Their insincerity is exposed. Rather than answer the question, they debate together what would be the repercussions for themselves if they answer in this way or that. They could acknowledge that John the Baptist was indeed God's messenger, but if they did so, why had they not obeyed his message and repented? If they denied John's God given authority, they risked upsetting the masses who saw John as a great prophet.

Honesty or truthfulness didn't enter into their thoughts at all. Instead they claim that they didn't know the answer. So the Lord Jesus declines to answer the question the leaders had posed. In reality, over the months and years the ministry of the Lord in teaching and healing had been ample witness to the authority with which He acted. I am reminded of a Psalm of King David: "Bless the LORD O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases" Psalm 103:2-3. They would have known this Psalm well but they had ascribed His Divine power to Satan! "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." Matthew 12:24. These leaders had already made up their minds about the Lord Jesus. Jesus knew they were planning His rejection and crucifixion.

As we come to the end of our talk this morning, let me leave you with a question, probably the most important question you will ever have to answer. Have you made up your mind about the Lord Jesus? Will you too reject Him or will you gladly accept Him as your Saviour and own Him as Lord? The Apostle Paul tells us, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9.

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