

LENTEN STUDIES 2021 WESTERN HEIGHTS UNITING CHURCH THE LAST WEEK



I RECOMMEND THAT EACH STUDY IS COMMENCED WITH A TIME OF PRAYER, SPOKEN OR QUIET, ASKING FOR THE SPIRIT OF GOD TO HELP US UNDERSTAND THROUGH OUR DISCUSSION, THINKING, READING.

STUDY 2 Monday

To understand Mark's intentions in this passage, we need to understand something about Mark's way of writing.

Mark often uses pairs of incidents that are intended to be interpreted in the light of each other and this story about the fig-tree is one of those pairs. Here is a little diagram that will help: Have a look at these and then the last one is of course, our study for today,

	Example1	Ex. 2	Ex. 3	Ex. 4
Incident A	3:20-21	5:21-24	6:7-13	11:12-14
Incident B	3:22-30	5:25-34	6:14-29	11:15-10
Incident C	3:21-35	5:35-43	6:30	11:20-21

There are other examples, and we'll come to these further along the journey. Now, looking at this Monday passage, and then at verses 20-21 that happen on Tuesday.

Mark 11:12-19 ¹²On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it. ¹⁵Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He was teaching and saying, '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.'

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples^[a] went out of the city. ²⁰In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots

It's Passover, so around March – April, and as Mark says, it's not the season for figs.

But Jesus is hungry, and he goes to it, looking for food, but there's none there, and he pronounces a curse on the tree for its barrenness.

FOR DISCUSSION

Is Jesus petulant and unreasonable, or is this a parable?

OK. It's obviously a parable, but what is this getting at?

If the fig-tree is barren, cursed, and then withered to its roots, and it represents the temple worship, then our age-old name for the story, the "cleansing of the temple" is a misnomer. It isn't cleansed. It is cursed.

SOME HISTORY TO HELP US UNDERSTAND

Israel's priestly cast were originally ordained for life. They came from the priestly line of Aaronic or Levitical priests. But in the century before Jesus, the Hasmonean or Maccabean leaders who won independence from Syria had changed the status to agents of royalty; the ruler became Priest/King. There were four families from whom the High Priests were chosen, usurping the role of the hereditary High Priests, and this is probably why the legitimate priestly cast had decamped to the Qumran community.

These four families who vied with each other and against each other for the role, and the Romans and the Herodians hired and fired them at will. These four families are named in a poetic indictment from the first century.

Woe is me because of the House of Beothus

Woe is me because of the staves. (clubs)

Woe is me because of the House of Hanan (Annus in Jn 18:13 and Acts 4:6)

Woe is me because of their whisperings

Woe is me because of the House of Kathos

Woe is me because of their pens

Woe is me because of the House of Ishmael, son of Phiabi

Woe is me because of their fists.

For they are high priests,

And their sons are treasurers

And their sons-in-law are trustees

And their servants beat the people with staves

(Pesahim 57)

The Priest represented the Jews before God on the Day of Atonement and then represented them before Rome for the rest of the year.

Both Priest and Temple are deeply integrated into Roman rule.

A MUCH MORE ANCIENT PROBLEM

Now look at Jesus' quote from Mark 11:17

Jesus is quoting from Jeremiah 7:5-7 & v11. Have a read of it, then read Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:6-8.

Now, go back to Jeremiah 7 and read what follows in 7:12-14.

Does this illuminate the fate of the fig-tree? How?

Can you imagine what was the content of Jesus' teaching?

(He was teaching and saying, '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.')

FOR DISCUSSION

Borg & Crossan write: "When worship substitutes for justice, God rejects God's temple."

ANOTHER THOUGHT: Mark is writing at a time (about 70ad) when a Roman crackdown on zealots drove them in large numbers to Jerusalem. The temple became their stronghold. These fierce Zionists were described by Josephus as 'lestes', brigands, robbers; the same word Jesus uses in 11:17. Perhaps Mark is recalling, and thinking, that this narrow nationalism is no more the answer than a corrupt collaborating priesthood.

DISCUSS: How does today's study reflect and challenge our own time and place?

- **CLOSE WITH A TIME OF QUIET PRAYER.**