

LENTEN STUDY 3

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 3: Tuesday Mk 11:27 – 13:37

A lot happens on Tuesday, filling almost three chapters, so Mark's concentration on the day is significant. This day would be the basis for a complete study series on it's own, so we will have to brush lightly over much significant material, including Jesus graphic warning of what it will be like in 70 ad when Jerusalem is destroyed.

Tuesday of Jesus' last week begins with the words "In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig-tree, withered away to its roots."

The day ends with Jesus speaking; "And what I say to you, I say to all. Keep awake!"

It helps to think of the fig-tree tree incident as a parable, but told with actions and physicality, not just words. People sometime treat parables as allegories. This was popularised in 18th and 19th century western Christianity. In allegories each different part of the story is representing something. Parables are more nuanced than this, less direct, more reflective and open ended. They hold up a narrative as something to think about, reflect on, discuss. They hold out larger truths to be grasped and understood rather than direct parallels. The word literally means something "thrown alongside that casts light on the object."

In his opening verses 11:20-25 Mark places the fate of the fig tree next to Jesus' speaking about 'this mountain' (meaning Mount Zion on which the temple stands) being cast down and thrown into the sea. Now read Mk 13:1-2.

FOR DISCUSSION

Mark is writing around the time when the temple was destroyed. Is he reading back into Jesus words the events that have just happened? Did Jesus predict the temple's destruction? What else might be going on here, for Jesus as he acts and speaks, and for Mark as he writes it down for his church around 70ad.

11:25 ²⁵ 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'¹⁴

FOR DISCUSSION: Why do you think this verse comes in at this point? Why has Jesus said it, here? Why has Mark remembered it, in this part of his narrative?

WHAT FOLLOWS is a series of conflict stories as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Read 11:27-33 By what authority?

Chief Priests and Elders were at the top of the system of collaboration and domination; the scribes were the literate class, employed by them to carry out their agenda.

FOR DISCUSSION

What is this conflict about?

Jesus has thus far set up a contradiction between

1. His entry into Jerusalem and Pilate's entry into Jerusalem.
2. He has set up another planned contradiction by his actions in the temple.

What are the contrasts in this interchange between Jesus and the Chief Priests and their entourage?

(It is worth remembering that the Priests, Elders and Scribes have a borrowed authority, authorised by Rome. Any other authority is a direct challenge to their status and means of authority, but also to Rome's right to give that authority.)

3. *What questions does this passage throw up, about where authority lies in our world and how we negotiate with it?*

Now read 12:1-12. The Parable of the wicked (greedy) tenants

When Jesus started to tell this parable, for every Jewish person it would have immediately brought to mind the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7, but also the judgement contained in verses 8-9 and 10. I recommend reading this passage, Isaiah 5:1-10, before going any further.

FOR DISCUSSION

Knowing what we do about the system of domination, land acquisition and resultant wealth division and poverty in Israel at the time of Jesus, discuss the phrase "When they realized that he had told this parable against them...."

Read Mark 12:13-17

The punch line in this story is so well known: 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

But we read it in a different context to Mark. It is worth thinking for a moment, who it is that comes to throw the question at Jesus, 'Should we pay taxes to Caesar?'

The Pharisees and Herodians are not a homogenous group. The Pharisees are pushing for 'intensification of traditional religious practices, including Sabbath observance and purity laws' (Borg and Crossan p.62) The Herodians were supporters of the client-rulers, Herod and his family. These two groups also appear united in Mk 3:6 & 8:15 against Jesus.

The first reference was linked to anger at Jesus for healing on the sabbath, the second to feeding the hungry.

There is a great irony that in this passage today, these two groups are sent by the authorities to trap Jesus.

FOR DISCUSSION

"When faith and politics are united in purpose of power, people are hungry in every way, and the sabbath is not a place of healing and wholeness."

What belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God? The story of the vineyard is also a story about who really owns the vineyard and who is attempting to steal it, and how. If the vineyard is a symbol of Israel, it belongs to God. The Psalmist's words are that the "earth is the Lord's and all its fullness. Ps 24:1 In a way, Jesus answer suggests that everything belongs to God.

What belongs to Caesar then?

Is this passage whole passage pertinent for our discussion about care for the environment, as we take the vineyard by violence and give what is God's to another, for profit.

Who has authority? How do we live out our perception of where authority lies?

Read Mark 12:28-34

then Mark 12:41-44.

I suggest sitting quietly with these passages, in silence for a little while, then read

Prayer: Lord, when I long to save the world and sort it out, let me remember that you are sovereign of all.

God, when injustice and evil are obvious and brazen, help me trust that you have sent them, too.

God, when I cannot understand why justice is so slow to come, restrain me from making myself the judge of all.

But, hear my prayer for justice, strengthen my hand to work for good, stir in me holy anger when people suffer.

And in your own time, come and sort it out. Please, God