

Mk 11:12-21  
*Tim Anderson 2/4/2023*

I don't know whether you've ever had this sort of an experience.  
You're trying to do something.  
Get a lawn mower to start and it just won't go.  
You try and try and get frustrated –  
and then you kick the lawnmower and get a very sore foot.  
Or you are trying to balance the angel on the top of the Christmas tree,  
the just won't sit there,  
it keeps on falling down.  
Finally in frustration –  
you chuck it on the ground and it smashes.  
Those aren't real stories from my life.  
I couldn't think of any.  
Yet I know that type of thing has happened to me.  
Get frustrated –  
lash out and do something silly.  
But conveniently,  
I can't remember a real example.  
I never like remembering the times I've stuffed up.  
Maybe you can?

The question that's on my mind is,  
“Is that what happened to Jesus with the fig tree?”  
He's hungry and he sees a fig tree.  
So he goes to it to get a snack.  
The fig tree has no fruit.  
Jesus gets frustrated,  
spits the dummy,  
and curses the fig tree.  
I mean it's not the fig tree's fault, is it?  
Mark tells us in verse 13 that it's not the season for figs.  
This wasn't a fig tree that was perpetually barren –

it was just the wrong time of year.  
So why did Jesus curse the fig tree?

If the Bible were a story about me,  
spitting the dummy might be a plausible explanation.  
But it doesn't ring true about Jesus.

The other stories we read about him in the Bible  
make me think that a dummy spit would be most out of character.

So I'm looking hard at the passage  
trying to find what Jesus was trying to teach with this action.  
Mark, who wrote down this story has given me a big clue.

He's written about the fig tree,  
then he's told us about Jesus in the temple,  
and then he's gone back to the fig tree again.

Fig tree, temple, fig tree.

It's what you might call a sandwich,  
where the fig tree is the bread  
and the story about Jesus in the temple is the meat in the middle.  
Jesus is telling us that the temple was like the fig tree.

God gave the temple to the nation of Israel to bear certain fruit –  
but the temple was not bearing fruit.

So Jesus is trying to teach his disciples something  
by the way he cursed the fig tree.

Which is a satisfying answer for me  
because my anxiety when I read this story  
is that my high regard for Jesus living a sinless life be kept intact.  
So I don't like the thought of Jesus spitting the dummy.

But what about if someone an environmentalist were reading this story?  
He wouldn't be anxious about maintaining the reputation of Jesus –  
but his is very concerned about trees.

This might not be old growth forest—  
but it's still a tree –  
and I imagine he would find the story offensive.

And there are lots of environmentalists out there.  
What should we say to them about this story being in our Bible?  
Possibly the key message  
is that Jesus is the creator of every tree in the world –  
he planned and sustains the beauty of the old growth forest –  
if you love the old growth forest,  
then give some heed to the man who made it.  
Don't be too fast to write him off because of one fig tree.  
If I make a sand castle down the beach,  
no one calls me a vandal if I jump on it.  
Jesus as creator has to be allowed to act as Lord of the creation.

Let's leave the fig tree for the moment  
and turn to the temple.  
Again you have a story  
about Jesus displaying behaviour we wouldn't encourage in our children.  
But this time it's a bit easier to see that there's a good reason for it.  
Jesus is very angry about what's going on in the temple.  
He upends the tables of the money changers.  
He drives out those buying and selling produce.  
It's one of those stories in the Bible  
that make me wish there were video clips available.  
Wouldn't it be great to be able to see  
some desperate greedy money changer  
scrambling round on the floor  
trying to gather up his coins as they rolled all over the place?  
Wouldn't it be interesting to see how one man could have such presence  
to drive out all the people buying and selling in the temple?  
If I try to imagine myself  
trying to drive out all the people at the Vic Market.  
I have no doubt  
that I'd be bundled up and unceremoniously ejected myself.  
Jesus in the temple would have been a spectacle to watch.  
But what made Jesus so angry?

That's the key question.

As God's only Son living on the earth,  
he clearly has a right to speak about what happens in God's only temple –  
the place where God lived amongst his people.  
But what outraged Jesus so much?

Over the years people have come up with various theories.

People have said that maybe Jesus was outraged by economic injustice.

The traders were ripping people off  
as they came to buy the animals for their sacrifices.

And they take Jesus' words,  
"You have made it a 'den of robbers'  
as support for their theory.

Other people have said that Jesus was angered  
because the temple should have been a spiritual place  
and the mixing of grubby commerce with religion made him mad.

Those people would probably feel a bit upset by our jumble sale.  
But I don't think either of those concerns  
were the main thing on Jesus' mind.

Jesus explains his actions with two quotes from the Old Testament.

The first comes from the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus says,

"Is it not written:"

in other words –

it's in the Bible so you people should be obeying this –

"Is it not written:

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

that means that the Old Testament expected people from everywhere –  
not just Jews but people from every country on earth  
to be able to come to Jerusalem  
to the temple to pray to the one true God.

Now you need to know a little bit about the architecture of the temple  
to understand the significance of that comment.

You could think about the temple as five rectangles inside of each other.  
In the very centre was the holy of holies.  
That was the part where God lived and people didn't go.  
In the next rectangle was the sanctuary where only the priests went.  
The next rectangle out was for Jewish men only.  
The next rectangle out was for Jewish women.  
And only in the outside rectangle were people from other countries,  
people who weren't Jews allowed to go to pray.  
No prizes for guessing where the market was set up.  
It was in that outside rectangle –  
in the court of the gentiles.  
I don't know if you've ever tried praying in the Vic market.  
But try to imagine that,  
and then imagine that the Vic Market sold live animals as well.  
You have the bleating of sheep and the cooing of doves –  
and the smell of what they leave behind as well.  
You wouldn't go there to pray.  
The market that the Jewish leaders had set up  
in the outer court of the temple  
was stopping people from other countries  
from being able to talk to the one true God.  
It had taken away their place for prayer.

It had always been God's plan  
that his special relationship with his people, the Jews,  
would not be an exclusive relationship,  
that would shut other people out from getting to know God.  
No.

The point was that the Jewish people  
should be a blessing to the other nations  
by serving as an advertisement  
for the benefits of having a relationship with the one true God.  
And that this should draw others into worshipping God too.  
As God said to Abraham –

the father of the Jewish people –  
“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”  
But Abraham’s descendents had largely forgotten  
that their purpose was to be a blessing to others.  
And they set up the temple so it would keep non Jews out.  
And that made Jesus mad.

Here’s a tough question for us.  
You see there’s not much difference  
between God’s purpose for his people back then  
and his purpose for his people now.  
We are the church, God’s people now,  
and it’s our job to be a blessing to others,  
that they might be drawn into relationship with him.  
So here’s the tough question.  
Do we do things that keep people away from relationship with God?  
We certainly don’t set up our churches  
so that people who don’t follow Jesus  
are only allowed in certain areas  
and then run a market in those areas to keep them away.  
Thank heavens for that!  
But there are other more subtle ways we can give the message to outsiders  
that they are not welcome around here.  
If people come with children into a church,  
and they are made to feel an intrusion  
because their kids are just being normal kids.  
Then that’s a way of effectively excluding people.  
Or if people are a bit socially awkward,  
does no one talk with them over morning tea?  
That’s a way of effectively excluding people.  
If we make people feel like intruders –  
that’s just as effective a way of keeping them out as running a market.  
I’m so glad that we have our family chill space –  
so that kids can be kids with out anyone getting up tight about it.

It gives us an opportunity to be more welcoming –  
not just to the children,  
but to their parents,  
and to anyone else who gets a bit of a kick  
out of seeing the joy of being alive that children possess.  
But of course kids are just one group of people.  
They're an important group –  
Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.  
But we need to think hard  
about how we are being welcoming to all sorts of folks.  
Liz Kovaks told us last Sunday,  
that it was Marj Overton taking her out for a coffee  
that sold her on being part of God's people here.  
We need to keep doing those kinds of things.  
Certainly one thing we don't have the freedom to do  
is to be selective about who we will welcome.  
“This person fits my idea of what it means to be an Anglican –  
so I'll welcome them in.  
But this person ought to be in some other church –  
they should keep away.”  
There's no place in our church for people with that sort of an attitude.  
Jesus said,  
“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”  
It makes Jesus mad,  
when people are shut out from being able to have a relationship with God.

But something else was making Jesus mad.  
There's a second quote from the Old Testament.  
“But you have made it a den of robbers.”  
That's a quote from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah 7:9-11.  
If you didn't know that the phrase ‘den of robbers’  
came from the Old Testament,  
then you could be excused for thinking  
that Jesus was referring to financial practices

in the market that they had set up.  
Maybe they were ripping people off –  
charging too much for the animals that were to be sacrificed.  
But when we read the quote in the Jeremiah passage,  
we can see that it's the 'den' part rather than the 'robber' part  
that is the key word.

A den is a place where robbers go to feel safe.  
They stash their loot there  
and hide themselves away so no one can find them.  
Then they emerge at night to commit their crimes.  
A robbers den wouldn't be much good  
if the lawful authorities knew where it was,  
they'd just come and round the robbers up.  
You might have read stories of the early days in Australia –  
many of the bushrangers had dens just like that.

Let me read Jeremiah 7:9-11.

“Will you steal and murder,  
commit adultery and perjury,  
burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,  
and then come and stand before me in this house which bears my name,  
and say, “we are safe”  
safe to do all these detestable things?  
Has this house which bears my name,  
become a den of robbers to you?  
But I have been watching declares the Lord.”  
The temple has become a den of robbers  
because the people were using it as a way of trying to hide from God.  
They thought to themselves,  
so long as we do the right sacrifices in the temple,  
we can do what ever we like the rest of the time.  
We can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie under oath,  
and God can't get us because we've made the sacrifices for our sins.  
The temple, instead of being a place to relate to God



had become a place to hide from God.

So what Jesus was saying was  
as well as excluding other people from relating to God  
by turning their place to pray into a market –  
you guys take the animals you buy for sacrifice at the market  
and you go in and sacrifice them  
but you don't change your ways of living.  
You maintain the outward form of religion  
but you are totally insincere.

Well it's no wonder that when the chief priests and teachers of the law  
heard him say this,  
they began looking for a way to kill him.  
Their whole lives were wrapped up in the outward forms of religion.  
To tell them that they were totally insincere about it.  
Of course they will be angry.

When God set up the temple as a religious system  
it was designed to bear fruit.

The fruit of drawing people from other nations into a relationship with him  
and the fruit of changed lives amongst his people.

Jesus says,  
the temple has become like a fig tree full of leaves and with no fruit.  
It looks to all the world like there should be something there –  
but when you look closely –  
there's nothing.

The nations are not being drawn to worship God.

The Jews are not using the forgiveness that was available in the temple  
as a motivation to live wholeheartedly for God.

And so the temple's time was up.

The next day the fig tree had withered from the roots.

Jesus was letting them know –  
that was the fate of the temple.

It was meant to enable people to have a relationship with God.

It wasn't working  
and so it would be replaced –  
people would relate to God through Jesus  
and not through the temple.

Here's another tough question for us.  
You see it's possible to treat Jesus in the same way  
that the Jewish people were treating the temple.  
You can say,  
“I trust in Jesus –  
my sins are forgiven –  
so I'm safe –  
safe to do whatever I want to.  
Jesus becomes the den  
and we become the robbers.  
He's our way of hiding from God.  
How silly.  
God is no one's fool.  
He knows whether or not we are sincere.  
You can't fool God with a few perfunctory bits of religion.  
His claim on us is a life following Jesus.  
So the tough question is  
“Are we fair dinkum about following Jesus?”

Now I can't give you a list of good works  
that will prove you are fair dinkum.  
Praying, reading your Bible and going to church  
or something like that.  
As soon as you make a check list  
then it becomes something that you can tick off  
and not have your heart in it.  
The question of “Are you fair dinkum?”  
is a question of your heart.

If someone asks me who I barrack for  
I'll tell them Richmond.  
But the truth is,  
I'm not fair dinkum.  
It's not just that I never go to games or watch them on tv.  
I actually don't care.  
And I could go to games and watch them on tv  
but I still wouldn't be a fair dinkum supporter  
unless I cared whether they win or loose.

Are you a fair dinkum follower of Jesus?  
Is it a passion of your heart?  
That's the tough question.

Jesus' death on the cross for us is designed to bear fruit in our lives.  
If we want to take the forgiveness and then live how we want to,  
We are treating Jesus like a den of robbers.

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations -  
that means we include everyone.  
Include everyone.  
Be fair dinkum.  
That's the passage in 2 points, five words.