

23rd February, 2025

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's

Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn:

When to our world the Saviour
came
the sick and helpless heard his
Name,
and in their weakness longed to see
the healing Christ of Galilee.

That good physician! Night and day
the people thronged about his way;
and wonder ran from soul to soul,
'The touch of Christ has made us
whole!'

His praises then were heard and
sung
by opened ears and loosened
tongue,
while lightened eyes could see and
know

the healing Christ of long ago.
Of long ago: yet living still,
who died for us on Calvary's hill;
who triumphed over cross and
grave,
his healing hands stretched forth to
save.

His sovereign purpose still remains
who rose in power, and lives and
reigns;
till every tongue confess his praise,
the healing Christ of all our days.

The Sermon by David Bush

Read Isaiah 56:4-8, Mark 11:12-33 – Being in Charge

That Blasted Fig Tree :

It is a long passage, and probably deserves a longer treatment than I'm about to give it, but let's start with the high-level view:

- The setting is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, to celebrate, with 10s or maybe 100s of thousands of others, the feast of Passover.
- Arriving it seems late in the day it seems, he heads to the temple courts, looks around, presumably notes what is going on, heads back to Bethany.
- The next morning back on his way in ... we read this passage today ... with his disciples, Jesus denounces the fig tree, enters the temple courts and starts to drive out the money changers, incurring the wrath of the chief priests and the teachers, before leaving the city once again.
- The day following they return, the disciples noting the fig tree had now withered.
- Reaching Jerusalem Jesus again preaches in the temple courts, when the chief priest and teachers try to entrap him, Jesus refuses to answer them unless they answer an entrapping question of his own.

I guess the difficulty here for most of us is that this looks like a spiteful and vengeful act against a tree, which wasn't fruiting, because it wasn't the season. This is a clash because it isn't the Jesus we feel we know and love.

If we did choose to look beyond a seemingly obviously selfish 'miracle' where Jesus kills the tree in a selfish and vengeful act, we might find a general lesson against fruitlessness in the lives of Christians is to be condemned. Indeed, this is a commonly repeated lesson in the New Testament.

But I think that is over simplifying, and too easy, too comfortable. You see, Mark brackets this story with a Jerusalem story **before** and **after** the fig tree incident.

I can see a thread, then that starts with Jesus first visit to Jerusalem, where he looks about and leaves, the cursing of the fig tree the next morning on his way back to Jerusalem to confront those in the Court of the Gentiles who had turned his Father's house into a place – not just of commerce – but of extortion.

Jesus has a righteous anger at the way the temple had been corrupted by the Jewish leadership, it is the priests and teachers of the law who he rails against. They, and the moneychangers and vendors exploit worshippers. They distract rather than focus the Jewish worshippers. They bear responsibility for the lack of fruitfulness in their people.

In this context then, I choose to see in the incident of the fig tree, as a parable – but an acted-out parable, where Jesus is acting out the rejection of the leaders of the Jewish people for leading the ordinary Jewish worshipper into an barren and fruitless faith.

In Jerusalem afterwards he acts not in parable but for real against what is wrong, and on the way home Mark emphasises this by drawing the reader's attention to the fig tree indeed barren, as an emphasis of Jesus authority to challenge a lack of respect for God, his temple and his people.

Mark is telling us here about Jesus being angry with people in authority who don't act with respect for God and respect for his places and people.

Perhaps think of the old practice of selling indulgences – or ripping off pilgrims with fake relics. The focus of those people was diverted from fruitful Christian lives to material enrichment of people and leaders.

But exploitation of places and people in church settings goes way beyond financial exploitation, the horrors of emotional, physical and sexual exploitation by those in church settings is undoubtedly something Jesus would have acted with at least as much firmness, and probably more, than he did the moneychangers, and dove sellers.

But I would indeed extend this application beyond specific church settings, a Christian in a position of authority, in a church setting or not, is held to higher standards of behaviour, and any exploitation, advantage taking is, if I read this passage correctly – plain wrong. As is standing by and not condemning it.

Almost all of us are probably in the place where we have some authority, some power, and we need to look critically and carefully at ourselves – we must not exploit, take advantage of, or abuse others, and we must not stand by in faux ignorance when it happens – inside a church setting or outside. This sort of behaviour, now as then, is fundamentally crippling, stunting and impairing fruitfulness in others – individually and as a church body.

Jesus' condemnation of the tree could be a condemnation on us if we impair the growth, development and fruitfulness of others' lives. If Jesus cursing a fruitless tree shocks us, for goodness' sake lets allow it to shock us into critical reflection and change.

2nd Sunday before Lent: Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, St Andrews and The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

At the Church of the Good Shepherd

- Tea and Chat: March 19th at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: March 19th at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: February 26th and March 26th at 10.30 in the Church Hall.
- The Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday in Church.

For Further information:

This paper and all parish details are on the website at <https://www.pariahofmedsteadandfourmarks.co.uk>