

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

25. The Fig Tree Factor.

Matthew 21:18-22. Refreshed and renewed, Jesus and his disciples set out from Bethany on the morning after the cleansing of the temple, to go to Jerusalem. On the way he carried out another enactment of His judgement when He cursed the fig tree. (Matthew's story is a telescoped version of **Mark 11:12-25**.) The fig tree was a symbol of Israel which, like the temple, looked good from a distance but was fruitless on closer examination. This was an acted-out parable showing the anger of Jesus – not in any way because His hunger could not be satisfied – but rather, at Israel's religion without substance: the temple was an impressive sight but the worship there was hollow because it did not come from sincere hearts. Mark points out that the fig tree had withered from the roots, it was more than just the yellowing of the leaves. Again this is significant: Israel's "roots" were in their love and obedience to God, and because that had withered, they could bear no fruit of true worship or loving actions. The only hope for fruition lay in their whole-hearted trust in God, as Jesus told His disciples in **Mark 11:22** – complete trust in God, obedience and forgiveness towards men was the condition for effectiveness in prayer.

Is there a place for anger in the Christian's life? How should we express our anger at wrongdoing?

The courage of Jesus.

Matthew 21:23-27. We can sometimes have impressive courage when we are angry, only to retreat into our shell when our anger cools. But Jesus showed tremendous courage at the outset of the following day, as He went right back with breath-taking coolness to the temple where He had created such a drama the previous day. Here, calm in the knowledge that God was watching over Him, He used every spare minute of opportunity to impart His teaching. This of course was interrupted by the approach of the chief priests and elders who demanded to know just what right Jesus thought he had to air his outrageously nonconformist ideas. Jesus, like a seasoned teacher, answered their question with a question, which of course they found impossible to answer. Because they had refused to believe the message of John the Baptist, they were not ready to take the next step and believe in the life-changing message of Jesus.

Pointed Parables.

Matthew 21:28-46. Having silenced his critics Jesus launched into some parables targeted directly at them. It is interesting to note that there were 2 sons – that is, they both had the same father, they were brothers, but there the relationship ended. The self-righteous religious leaders who pretended willingness to obey God, had no love or concern for the "tax collectors and the prostitutes" who repented and did actually obey Him. Jesus added a rebuke for their unwillingness to believe John's message to repent.

Jesus' next parable, about the tenants, was crystal clear in its meaning and struck like a finely-pointed spear into the hearts of the hierarchy listening to him. The vineyard as representing the Jewish nation was a familiar prophetic picture, as we can see from **Isaiah 5:7** – "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel." Every detail in the story would be familiar to them – the thorn hedge to keep out wild boars, the watch tower as lodging for the workers as well as being a lookout for thieves, and the winepress. This would consist of 2 troughs either hollowed out of a rock or built of bricks, one a little higher than the other and connected by a channel. The grapes were pressed in the higher trough and the juice ran off into the lower trough. It was normal for the owner of a vineyard to go off on a journey. There were many absentee landlords who let out their estates and were interested only in collecting the rental at the right time. Even the action of the tenants was not so fanciful. Palestine at that time was seething with economic unrest, the working people discontented and rebellious, and the idea of seeking to eliminate the son was not so improbable.

The religious leaders could not fail to recognize the symbolism. The owner of the vineyard would have to be God. The tenants were those religious leaders, the messengers were the prophets of the Old Testament, so often mistreated and even killed, and the son was someone they refused to recognize – Jesus Christ himself. In this one story Jesus set out at once the history and the doom of Israel, ironically underlined by those very leaders as they gave him their answer in **verse 41**, unwittingly pointing to the coming era of the worldwide Church.

Jesus sums up his message in **verse 42** by turning the spotlight on himself. The word “stone” is full of rich imagery in the Bible. In **Isaiah 28:16** we read of the stone – tested, precious, a *cornerstone* for a sure foundation and worthy of trust. In **Psalms 118: 22,23** we find the *capstone* rejected by men has been given a place of honour by God. We might ask which one is Christ, and the answer is, both. The cornerstone was the beginning, the initial part of the building, setting the standard for every other stone to be strictly in line with it. The capstone was the final stone to be put in place, at the crown of the arch forming the doorway, the culmination of the whole building.

In **Zechariah** is the thrilling story of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, completed in 516 B.C, after the Jewish exiles had been allowed to go back home from their captivity in Babylon. **Chapter 10:4** tells us the cornerstone will come from Judah, echoed by Paul in **Ephesians 2:20**, “Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” Back to **Zechariah, 4:7**, where the capstone, the finishing touch, will be set in place to shouts of blessing. **Verses 8,9** sum it up - “Then the word of the Lord came to me, ‘The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it.’” Zerubbabel was a descendant of David and in the genealogy of Christ, a prince who began and completed the temple of God.

Jesus said in **Matthew 16:18**, “I will build my church.” He is the author (initiator) and perfecter of our faith – (**Hebrews 12:2**), and in **Revelation 22:13** he says himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” What a privilege those religious leaders missed, not bowing before him in reverence! Their conscience pricked, they looked for a way to arrest him, only hindered by their fear of the crowd who mainly held that at least Jesus was a prophet.

*What Jesus declared about the Church, he does also for the individual. In **Philippians 1:6** Paul says, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Has Jesus begun a “good work” in you? Do you get disheartened when you can’t see the finished product? Never give up. Never say, “That’ll do, Lord: I’m happy the way I am now, thanks.” Jesus will not finish refining and perfecting us until the day we enter heaven and won’t need it any more. Accept his working on you until you become a masterpiece – to the glory of God!*

The Prince’s Wedding.

Matthew 22:1-14. Jesus, unstoppable, unflappable, continued with another parable – a different slant from the parable in **Luke 14**, (Study 19), this one not speaking of the bounties of a banquet but rather the serious consequences of rejecting the king’s offer. A royal invitation was virtually compulsory, a refusal to attend implying disloyalty to the royal house – a matter of treason. Jesus’ words were aimed at the religious leaders of Israel – God’s chosen people, yet treacherously refusing to avail themselves of the rich and vital programme that God had set out for them with the coming of Jesus Christ. When invitations to a great feast were sent out, the time was not stated: without refrigeration preparation for a feast was a much bigger project than now, and there was no way of storing leftovers, so it was essential that guests should come as soon as the banquet was ready. Hence the servants were then sent out to summon the guests and it was expected that they would have had their best suit dry-cleaned well in advance in honour of their host.

But, horror of horrors, with the height of rudeness, the invited guests refused to come! It was worse than an insult: it was an act of rebellion against the king. They had had prior warning and should have arranged their affairs accordingly. Not that they were engaged in some terribly sinful pastime: it was ordinary legitimate business which to them was more important than the invitation of the king.

A second wave of servants met with more than passive rejection, as some guests were actively hostile: on them would fall the terrible judgement of the king. (**verse 7**) In the next verse we see the result of Israel's rejection of their Messiah. The Gospel is extended to the Gentiles, and to the whole world.

Jesus was giving them a warning here: if Israel had heeded his message and accepted his way of peace, they would not have rebelled against Rome and their city would have been spared the destruction of 70 A.D. But note that the people who were active enemies of Jesus, and those who merely ignored him, both suffered the same fate as Jerusalem fell. It is not enough to give God a nod of recognition to be accepted: the "good" as well as the "bad" people have all sinned and need his forgiveness and acceptance of his lordship to attain eternal life. And it was the "bad" as well as the "good" who were invited to the feast.

Verses 11-14 have been given different interpretations. Royal weddings were elaborate affairs, and one view, at least as old as Augustine, is that if a guest was unable to find suitable attire, the king himself could provide something for him to wear. In that sense the wedding clothes could be seen as the "robe of righteousness" given by God only through belief in and acceptance of Christ. The guest who failed to accept that gift was rejected. On the other hand, with the more leisured pace of life in those times, the people on the streets would have been given time, having accepted the invitation, to go home and put on their best outfit first. To turn up in ordinary workday clothes was an insult to both the host and the bridal party. In that case, the wedding clothes would represent the change in life-style and behaviour of a believer in Christ, as proof of his inward change – without which, he would not be accepted.

Whichever interpretation you prefer, the truth remains that we can do nothing of ourselves to gain admission to the King's great banquet: everything we receive is a gift of His grace – forgiveness, eternal life, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us lead a life pleasing to Him. While this parable speaks of God's judgement, it also tells out loudly and clearly the infinite, surpassing love of this God, our Father.

Who Gets the Tax?

Matthew 22:15-22. The Pharisees were ardent nationalists and hated the Romans, while the Herodians supported Roman rule and their installation of the Herods – who were not even "pure-bred" Jews. So the Pharisees must have been pretty desperate to have joined forces with their arch-enemies to try and trap Jesus into saying something incriminating. Beginning with some smarmy flattery, they asked him an "honest" question – was it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Jesus of course could see right through that one: if he said yes, he could be branded a traitor by the Jews: if he said no, he could be arrested by the Romans. Poor as he was, he had to ask someone else to produce a denarius with its imprint of the Caesar, whereupon he could pronounce the obvious in **verse 21**, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's." End of argument.

Matthew 22:23-33. That same day the Sadducees, spurred on by the defeat of their rivals, decided to get in on the act. They told Jesus the absurd story of the woman whose first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh husbands died: last of all, she died too – it sure was about time! Must have been a rather lethal woman! Jesus must have had good self-control not to have laughed out loud at them, but instead he pointed to the Scriptures for his answer. The Sadducees only accepted the Pentateuch, (the first 5 books of the Bible) as having authority, so Jesus quoted **Exodus 3:6**, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living." In other words, those patriarchs are still alive, having been resurrected into Glory at the end of their earthly life.

Mark 12:28-34. While the crowds who overheard all this were astonished at the quickness of Jesus' mind, the Pharisees got together, licked their wounds and rallied to the fray. Mark gives a slightly different slant on this, and leaves us with an encouraging note after all the savage interrogation Jesus had endured. A teacher of the law had been listening, and realised the rightness of Jesus' answers. It

seems he genuinely wanted to know the answer to his question, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus answered him simply and directly. The paramount law is to love “the Lord your God” with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. If you do this, you will be able to love your neighbour as yourself. There is nothing more important than these 2 commandments. And after all the sneers and jibes and criticisms, it must have warmed Jesus’ heart to hear his questioner say, “Well said, teacher” and then to demonstrate that he understood perfectly the meaning of Jesus’ answer. Jesus reckoned his answer as wise, and maybe reading the man’s heart, he pronounced warmly, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

We can agree with all that Jesus teaches, we can like him as a person, yet not actually be in the Kingdom of God. We still must accept forgiveness at his hands and accept his control over our lives, to be his true follower and friend.