

“PRAYER AND FAITH (Mark 41)”
Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

In early 1970, film star Lee Marvin had an unlikely hit when a single from the film musical *Paint Your Wagon* was released. Called “*Wand’rin’ Star*”, it spent a number of weeks in the charts and actually reached the Number One spot. The B-side was an even more unlikely outing for Marvin’s co-star, Clint Eastwood. Anyone recall the title? It was “*I Talk To The Trees*”. (Spike Milligan did a famous parody of it which went, “*I talk to the trees: that’s why they put me away.*”) It’s one of the things that Prince Charles is often ridiculed for doing and there was a repeat of *The Good Life* a couple of weeks ago in which the benefits of talking nicely to your plants provided the main thread of the story. The idea that plants somehow respond to soothing conversation and grow better is put forward by many people on the flakier fringes of horticulture.

So what do we make of this rather curious story in which Jesus does just that – although in very different circumstances? In *v14* of the passage we’ve just read, Jesus gives the fig tree a good ticking off and the wretched thing dies. (It reminds me of an old English teacher I worked with who complained after a holiday in a cottage somewhere that there had been a cat in the cottage. He said that on the first evening, “I spoke to it rather sharply and it just turned over and died.”) What a wonderful way to do the weeding! Just have a good shout and curse at the unwanted shoots in the garden and next day they’ll all be gone. But I don’t think that’s the point of what Mark records here. In fact, I have to admit, I’m not entirely sure what the point is at all – and neither are most commentators when they find themselves forced to deal with this very strange passage.

What on earth is going on here? There are so many unanswered questions here and it seems such an incongruous story when you compare it with all the other things Jesus said and did. There are all kinds of ways of looking at it, including saying that Mark got this wrong, that he didn’t include it in his gospel but someone inserted it afterwards, that he has mixed up historical fact with a version of a parable that Jesus told elsewhere, and so on. Well, let’s begin by reiterating once again what we believe about this book and about the Bible in general. The Bible is inspired by God and we need at least to start off by taking what it says at face value. Mark is a good reporter and we have no reason to believe that he fabricated any of his writing. In other words, I’m going to proceed on the basis that what Mark says happened did actually happen. (Admittedly, that makes it a lot harder to work out what’s going on here, but let’s have a go anyway.)

Jesus and his close friends, the disciples, have come into Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover and the crowds have given him a tumultuous welcome, suggesting that he might be the Messiah they’ve been waiting for. At the end of a busy and exciting day (which we now celebrate as Palm Sunday), Jesus goes to look round the Temple and then they all go off to Bethany, a village about two miles out of the city, to spend the night. Next day, as they set off back to Jerusalem, Jesus notices a fig tree on the way out of Bethany (just after breakfast) and for some reason he finds that he’s hungry already. It’s a tree in full leaf – as you’d expect at that time of year: but there’s no fruit on it yet – as you’d also expect, and as Mark notes in *v13*. But Jesus wants figs and as he can’t get them, he curses the tree and says it will never, ever bear fruit again. And the disciples notice the next day that the tree has indeed withered and died.

What a very curious response! If you ever get to read any of the apocryphal gospels, the stories and legends about Jesus that were considered not to have any basis in reality and not to have been inspired by God but which were collected together in the early centuries, you’ll find all kinds of “unreasonable” miracles like this, but this is the only such miracle in our Bible. Why is it here? What’s the point of it? Isn’t this simply a demonstration of Jesus’ petulance? Doesn’t it make him seem very selfish?

Well, Mark has intertwined this story with the story of Jesus rooting out the profiteers and charlatans from the Temple precincts, and from what we’ve already seen of the way Mark arranges his material in

this book, it's a pretty safe bet that he's done that for a purpose. The two stories help to explain each other – and Jesus goes on to make another point from it, too.

You see, it's possible to see this miracle as a kind of acted parable, such as the ones used by the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. In other words, Jesus' actions here have a significance beyond the immediate. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others would often do really weird things to ram home to their audiences the main point of what God wanted them to say. The activity itself was pointless – Ezekiel's lying on his side for days, Hosea's marriage to a prostitute, Jeremiah's eating the scroll (you can look them up for yourselves when you get home) – but the message behind it was a powerful one.

The fig tree was always a symbol for Israel (and continues to be a national symbol). What Jesus does here to the tree is a pre-figuring of the judgement to come upon the religious hierarchy of the Jews. The tree was full of leaves – it looked healthy and attractive. Just as the activity in the Temple courts was that of an active and vibrant religious community. There was all kinds of stuff going on and anyone might have said what a great place it was. It's the same in many churches – all kinds of activity, all sorts of good things happening. But the fruit was missing. In the case of the Temple, there was no fruit of righteousness. The core values and activities of the people of God were being neglected in favour of commerce and manipulation. In many busy churches there is no depth to the spirituality, no real spiritual fruit being shown.

And so Jesus pronounces judgment. Only forty years after this episode the Romans ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. It withered from the roots up and there would be no further opportunity for it to bear spiritual fruit. Judgment on a religious hierarchy that had lost its focus on God came from him as surely and as finally as the judgment of Jesus was carried out on the tree. Let us beware allowing our leafy activity to disguise the fact that there is no real spiritual fruit being grown.

But as Peter comments on the death of the tree the next morning, Jesus uses the occasion to make another point about prayer. Peter is no doubt incredulous that the tree should have died so soon, but Jesus attributes it to God's power and once again encourages his followers to have faith in that power. If we, as his followers today, are to have the kind of impact that Jesus had, then we cannot rely on our own resources, but we must rely on God alone. As one commentator (Hugh Anderson) puts it: "*Whoever does not dally with reliance on his own worldly resources, but waits wholly on God will not find God wanting*" Or as Jesus puts it more succinctly, "*Have faith in God*".

Indeed, he gives an example of what might be done if we really do believe that God can work – and, it has to be said, it's another totally unreasonable miracle that he uses as an example. Why on earth would anyone want to move a mountain into the sea? And the fact that there are not loads of mountains sticking up out of the sea all over the world must be some kind of indication that it doesn't work quite as simply as that. But as we've seen Jesus do before, this is an example of hyperbole – an exaggeration to make a point. The point is that if you really believe, you can expect God to do great things.

But it's not just faith that is needed. There's also a need to have the right attitude as well. Those who really want to see God at work in answer to their prayers need to be people who are prepared to forgive, who are in the right relationship with those around. The prayers of those who are bitter and resentful do not have the same chance of success as the prayers of those who are, as the old *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, "*in love and charity with their neighbour*". It's a theme to which Jesus returns on more than one occasion. You cannot really worship God properly if you are holding a grudge against anyone. You cannot say that you really love God if you don't really love your brothers and sisters. Don't expect God to forgive you if you're not prepared to forgive other people.

The dramatic incident with the fig tree is not necessarily intended to demonstrate all this, but it is the starting point for what Jesus has to say – as were the curious dramatic episodes of the Old Testament prophets. And what he said to the disciples and to the people of his time still needs to be heard by us

today. We need to ensure that our many activities and programmes – which may give the impression of life and vitality – are not masking a lack of real spiritual fruit: that we're not **doing** so many good, Christian things that we've stopped **being** true followers of Christ.

And as we acknowledge that and attempt to have an impact on our world, on this community, we must ensure that our prayers are based on a real faith in God and that our relationships with those around are kept in good repair. If you start praying, or come to worship, while you're harbouring a grudge against anyone, or you're seething with resentment against a neighbour or a relative or a fellow Christian, then you'll get nowhere. You know, if we all committed ourselves to following Jesus' teaching here, there's no telling what we might achieve for the Kingdom of God. When you get home, don't go off and talk to the trees in the garden, go and have a word with God – because, unlike your flowering cherry tree, he'll reply.

Questions for discussion

1. We have looked at one possible explanation for Jesus' cursing of the fig tree. Can you suggest any more?
2. Does this story give us a licence to go round cursing things? Why/why not?
3. Was Jesus pronouncing judgement on the whole Jewish nation? Why/why not?
4. V23 seems very straightforward. But does prayer really work like that? And if it doesn't, is it simply our fault for not believing enough?
5. In what practical ways can you do what Jesus suggests in v25? What difference might it make if we all did that?
6. What is the one main lesson that you personally have learned from this passage?