

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 64”

Matthew 21:18-22

Well, after a bit of a break (since the end of last November, actually), we're back in Matthew's Gospel this morning. If you've started coming along to the church during the last three or four months – or if you've simply forgotten what we're doing – we're working our way through the Gospel of Matthew looking at what we can learn from the life and teaching of Jesus that can help us in our faltering attempts to follow him as his disciples. Matthew has written this account of Jesus' life for the people in the church which he leads in first century Palestine. It's a church which is made up of Jewish believers – the mission to the Gentiles hasn't really got going at this stage – and Matthew is having to deal, amongst other things, with the concerns of those newly converted Jewish Christians that they might be betraying their faith, heritage and culture by believing in this Jesus, the young rabbi from Nazareth.

Matthew is at pains to point out to them that this Jesus is not some kind of upstart trying to draw people away from their faith, but is actually the fulfilment of all the things which they'd read in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). He quotes from the Old Testament a great deal and he draws parallels between this Jesus and the Kingly Messiah predicted there by the prophets, preachers and poets of the Jewish faith. Far from betraying their faith, he says, they are actually doing what their faith was leading them towards all along – recognising the long-awaited Messiah who would come and inaugurate the amazing Kingdom rule of God which was so graphically described by the Old Testament writers. This is the logical outcome of their Jewish beliefs.

Jesus has come into the world, very much as predicted by the Hebrew Scriptures, and his life, example and teaching are all intended to help people return to the right relationship with God that he had wanted all along, a relationship that became spoiled by evil, by sin. Not only will Jesus provide a way to renew that relationship through his own sacrificial actions, but all along he has been offering glimpses of the Kingdom of God in what he has been doing. He has spoken of it in his stories and sermons. He has debated it and discussed it with the gatekeepers of religion – the Pharisees and teachers of the Law – trying to show them that they have put all their efforts into the wrong bits, they have been emphasising the rules and regulations (many of which are their own humanly devised attempts to get right with God) rather than seeking the liberation and love which are hallmarks of God's way. He has shown what life in the new Kingdom will be like by bringing wholeness to those who are diseased, disabled and desperate. He has restored dignity to the poor and the marginalised. He has given hope to those in despair, purpose to those with no faith in the future, joy to those whose lives had become desolate. He has thrown down a challenge to the complacent and arrogant and self-satisfied. And all along he has been saying, “This is what God's Kingdom will be like, this is what God wants for you – if you'll just believe and allow that

belief to shape your attitudes and actions as you live in this amazing world that God has created, a world that is nevertheless still flawed by the presence of evil.”

We know, with hindsight, that Jesus is on his way to fulfil his own destiny in that cosmic battle with the forces of evil that will cost him his life but guarantee ours. The characters in the story of Matthew’s Gospel don’t yet know that, obviously, so we join them here in chapter 21 as Jesus has reached Jerusalem in what will become the week leading up to his execution. At this point in the narrative, he is still enjoying the favour of the people, having just ridden into the city on a donkey, cheered to the echo by palm-waving crowds. And immediately before the strange little episode we’ve just read he has chased the profiteers and charlatans out of the Temple courtyard, symbolically returning to everyone – women, Gentiles, the disabled, outcasts – the opportunity of drawing close to God again. And after the triumph of his arrival in Jerusalem, on what we now call Palm Sunday, and the rumpus in the Temple, we come across this very odd little episode.

Now, as we’ve already said, we approach all these stories with hindsight, we’ve read to the end of the book, we’ve had two thousand years of help from preachers, teachers and scholars in getting to grips with all this, we recognise that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God. But remember that the people who were with him on this Monday of Holy Week just had to take things as they saw them. They watched Jesus doing all this, heard him saying things and couldn’t really process it all as we are able to do today. Indeed, there were probably people reading Matthew’s Gospel for the very first time who were still unaware of the ending of the book. They couldn’t possibly know what was really going on. Some of the commentators on this passage chide the disciples for not spotting the hidden meanings in all of this. Would you have done? Do you now, even?

What we seem to be looking at here is a very petulant Jesus, throwing a strop because he’s hungry and can’t get what he wants just when he wants it. As any arboriculturalist – and even Mark in his Gospel – would tell you, it wasn’t the right time for figs anyway. So, totally against what we read in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert, he uses his miraculous powers for his own ends and punishes the fig tree. Not only that, but he goes on to give his followers what appear to be wholly unrealistic expectations about the power of prayer. What on earth is going on? What’s this all about? Is it just Matthew (and Mark) showing that Jesus is human after all and he can have a hissy fit along with the best of us?

Almost certainly not! This isn’t a recipe for horticultural tomfoolery, an example for his followers to try and imitate when things don’t go their way in the orchard. (Although there someone at my brother’s church who did take it literally and tried to curse a tree on the pavement outside his house which blocked the light to his sitting room.) This is actually an acted parable. The great prophets of the Old Testament

often did weird things to try and get their points across – Ezekiel lay on his side for 390 days in front of a scale model of Jerusalem; Hosea married a prostitute. This is really in that kind of tradition. And there is actually a parable, a story which Jesus told, recorded in Luke’s Gospel (*Luke 13:6-8*) which is very much like this.

It’s early Monday morning and after a busy and exciting weekend, Jesus and his little group of followers are walking back into Jerusalem from their B&B in Bethany for the next day’s attractions in the Passover Festival week. Actually, it probably wasn’t a B&B as they clearly haven’t had their second B, their breakfast, and Jesus is hungry. He spots the tree and apparently fancies a fig or two. The trouble is, it’s not really time for figs. But before the proper crop of figs appears, the leaves come out and at the same time the tree also bears small green figs called “taksh”. These are very bitter apparently, but they were eaten by people who were desperate for food. As the real figs appear, the “taksh” drop off. These small green figs, then, are the sign that the tree will bear a good crop of edible figs a few weeks down the line. Matthew tells us that Jesus “*found nothing on [the tree] except leaves*”. This tree was clearly barren – there would be no fruit as the “taksh” had not appeared. It had all the leaves and so on, which from a distance would seem to indicate that fruit was on its way, but closer inspection proved that to be a false hope. There will be no fruit, so Jesus curses it and it withers up and dies.

This tree has a show of life – lots of leaves – that promises fruit, but it isn’t actually bearing any. William Barclay entitles his comments on this story “*Promise without performance*”. Jesus’ cursing of the tree demonstrates that this is not acceptable in his followers – he is not interested in promise without performance. Now, if you read through the commentaries and guides about this episode, you’ll discover that there is a strong argument that Jesus is actually talking about the Temple – which he has just purged with his eviction of the traders and which will be destroyed by the Romans in a few years’ time – or talking about the Jewish people (or more likely their leaders) whose showy religion does not give rise to any Kingdom life. There are a couple of prophecies which seem to take this line in the Old Testament:

*“I will take away their harvest,
declares the Lord.
“There will be no grapes on the vine.
There will be no figs on the tree,
and their leaves will wither.
What I have given them
will be taken from them.”
(Jeremiah 8:13)*

*“What misery is mine!
I am like one who gathers summer fruit
at the gleaning of the vineyard;
there is no cluster of grapes to eat,
none of the **early figs** that I crave.”
(Micah 7:1)*

(Note the mention of “*early figs*” – the “taksh” we’ve mentioned.)

That's all well and good – and it gives us an insight into the historical situation that Jesus was addressing, and may have helped those first Jewish readers of Matthew's Gospel to fit the destruction of the Temple into their ideas about God's purposes – but I would suggest it applies even more widely. This is a warning to all those who are serious about following Jesus, all those who want to follow the Kingly Messiah. Michael Green writes about "*God's frustrated hunger for true religion*". This is about not just appearing to be a follower of Jesus but actually bearing some fruit as a result of being a follower.

Ask yourselves: is there – in our church, in our own personal lives – a show of religion, but no real fruit? Is there promise but no performance? Is God frustrated with us because we've got all the right sort of outward stuff going on, but nothing's really happening in terms of our development as disciples and our impact on our community? You see, someone coming in here on a Sunday, for example, would see plenty of leaves, I reckon. Lots of people worshipping God, lively music and passionate prayers, a notice sheet packed full of activities, a bunch of people earnestly discussing stuff over coffee, well-taught children and young people – lots of leaves. But what about Monday morning, when your colleague needs help, when your children are being a real pain, when things aren't quite working out with your plans for the day, when you have the opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus – will there be any fruit from all that, as it were? We need to have demonstrated in our own lives – personally and as a congregation – that we're not just in it for show, that there's some fruit on the way.

And that, I would suggest, is exemplified in Jesus' remarks about prayer here. Clearly Jesus is using hyperbole in this section – he's exaggerating to make his point. He said something similar in *Matthew 17:20*:

Jesus replied, "[...] Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

As we said when we looked at those verses, if we were truly to take that at face value there would be all kinds of stuff sticking up out of the sea and there would be odd sects in the USA continually re-arranging the Rockies and the Appalachians. Dick France points out here that the faith Jesus is talking about here is not "*a quality of the person praying but a relationship of practical trust in the one to whom prayer is offered.*" In other words, this is all about keeping close to God, about putting our faith and trust in him. It's again about a relationship.

We so often get the wrong end of the stick, don't we? We concentrate on our behaviour when we should be sorting out our attitudes. And we get worked up about our statements of faith, the creeds we recite, the soundness of our songs, when we ought to be getting our relationship with God sorted out. We can all sing the songs, say "Amen" to the prayers, give the impression of being good, godly, believing followers

of Jesus. But until we actually take the decision to develop the way we relate to God – in discovering more about him, in listening for the voice of his Holy Spirit, in prayer (as Jesus is talking about here) – we won't see any fruit, there won't be any lasting outcome to our discipleship.

In John's Gospel Jesus uses another horticultural image to describe all this. In *John 15* he uses the idea not of a fig tree but of a vine to drive home his point. Listen to a few sentences from that passage:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [There it is again!] This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

The challenge to us this morning is about our closeness to God, our relationship with him, and our desire really to show the fruit of that relationship in our lives. To use the image that Jesus uses here, are you just a showy bunch of leaves? Or is there some useful fruit being produced as you try to follow in the footsteps of the Kingly Messiah? If it's just leaves, then both the fig tree and the unproductive branches of the vine offer us a pretty stark and chilling warning. But God continues to call us closer to himself and offers us the help of his Holy Spirit as we seek to do his will and produce fruit for his Kingdom. May Jesus be able to see that in all of us.

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This is actually an acted parable. The great prophets of the Old Testament often did weird things to try and get their points across. (Look at *Jeremiah 1:13, Ezekiel 3:3; 4:1-8, Hosea 1:2*.) This is really in that kind of tradition. And there is actually a parable, a story which Jesus told, recorded in Luke's Gospel (*Luke 13:6-8*) which is very much like this.

Jesus is hungry. He spots the tree and apparently fancies a fig or two. The trouble is, it's not really time for figs. But before the proper crop of figs appears, the leaves come out and at the same time the tree also bears small green figs called "taksh". These are very bitter apparently, but they were eaten by people who were desperate for food. As the real figs appear, the "taksh" drop off. These small green figs, then, are the sign that the tree will bear a good crop of edible figs a few weeks down the line. Matthew tells us that Jesus "*found nothing on [the tree] except leaves*". This tree was clearly barren – there would be no fruit as the "taksh" had not appeared. It had all the leaves and so on, which from a distance would seem to indicate that fruit was on its way, but closer inspection proved that to be a false hope. There will be no fruit, so Jesus curses it and it withers up and dies.

This tree has a show of life – lots of leaves – that promises fruit, but it isn't actually bearing any. Jesus' cursing of the tree demonstrates that this is not acceptable in his followers – he is not interested "*Promise without performance*" (William Barclay). (Look at *Jeremiah 8:13, Micah 7:1*.) This is about "*God's frustrated hunger for true religion*" (Michael Green). Ask yourselves: is there – in our church, in our own personal lives – a show of religion, but no real fruit? Is there promise but no performance? Is God frustrated with us because we've got all the right sort of outward stuff going on, but nothing's really happening in terms of our development as disciples and our impact on our community?

That is exemplified in Jesus' remarks about prayer here. (Compare *Matthew 17:20*) Dick France points out here that the faith Jesus is talking about is not "*a quality of the person praying but a relationship of practical trust in the one to whom prayer is offered.*" In other words, this is all about keeping close to God, about putting our faith and trust in him. It's again about a relationship. (Look at *John 15:1-8*.)

The challenge to us is about our closeness to God, our relationship with him, and our desire really to show the fruit of that relationship in our lives. To use the image that Jesus uses here, are you just a showy bunch of leaves? Or is there some useful fruit being produced as you try to follow in the footsteps of the Kingly Messiah?

Questions for discussion

1. Should we ever follow the example of Jesus in cursing the fig tree? Why/why not?
2. Should we take Jesus' words about prayer literally? Why/why not?
3. What might be the "*leaves*" in our church? in our own lives?
4. What constitutes "*bearing fruit*" for us today?
5. Look at *John 15*. What do you think is involved in "*pruning*" our lives?

6. What are you going to do in response to this passage?