



Mark 11:12–26

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered

the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” 18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. 19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. 20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree

withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” 22 “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. 23 “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” [26]

Reflection

For some people it's mangoes. I was at the fruit shop the other day and apparently this season we're in for a bumper crop. My wife Lauren loves mangoes, they're her all-time favourite fruit. So she was overjoyed at the news. Summer in Sydney and cheap mangoes. Can it get any better? But for me, it's figs. I love that figs are inverted flowers, what flowers are to the other senses – to sight and smell – figs are, I think, to taste. They say a pear is perfectly ripe only for a few moments, I think the same could be said of figs. But when you bite into a perfectly ripened (but not overripe fig), for mine it is as close to perfection in terms of texture and flavour than pretty much anything else God has given us to eat.

And so I think at a surface level at least I can relate to Jesus' disappointment in finding that fig tree empty in today's passage. Jesus was both fully God and fully human, and so it comes as no surprise (to the fig-lovers amongst us at least!) that the most perfect person ever to walk the earth experienced such disappointment when deprived of the perfect fruit.

But as we've come to expect neither Jesus or Mark are operating exclusively at the surface level in today's passage. And Jesus certainly wasn't in the habit of rather petulant dummy spits like cursing a fig tree for not having any figs even when it wasn't fig season. No, as you can imagine, something deeper is going on here. And from a literary perspective, the way Mark wraps the fig tree story around yes-

terdays' drama in the temple, the way he 'sandwiches' the sorry state of temple leadership in between a before-and-after fig episode gives us a strong clue as to what is really going on here. And adding in a few biblical building blocks when it comes to other references to fig trees also makes things much clearer.

In the Old Testament, fig trees are often signs of blessing and abundance. In Deuteronomy, Moses told the people that God was leading them into 'a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey'. It was a sign that God was with them, that they would be fruitful, that life was good. On the flipside however, we also see judgment language used in relation to the fig tree image. In Jeremiah 8 judgment is spoken upon Is-

rael with these words:

“Say to them, ‘This is what the LORD says:

“When people fall down, do they not get up?

When someone turns away, do they not return?

5 Why then have these people turned away?

Why does Jerusalem always turn away?

They cling to deceit;

they refuse to return.

6 I have listened attentively,

but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness,

saying, “What have I done?”

Each pursues their own course

like a horse charging into battle.

He goes on to say,

13 “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.”

Jesus has been declaring throughout Mark's gospel that the kingdom of heaven has arrived! And that he himself is the fulfilment of everything that has been promised. A new era has begun, God is with us! The children rejoiced but in those who were leading the people – the religious

leaders and the priests – Jesus sees a faith that is old, tired and cynical. Fruitless.

The place of God's presence, the location of worship, has now moved from a place to a person, from the temple to Jesus, and the fruit this should produced is praise, worship and adoration. Instead we have affront, indignation and jealous. Barrenness. Just like that fig tree – bearing no fruit at all. As Jesus says elsewhere,

19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Matt 7:19

A season of cutting down and re-planting is coming upon Israel. The old way of things are now over. The temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial system replaced by a new

and better way of relating to God, the flood-gates opened to the nations, an abundant harvest, sown, watered and tended by the son of God and the Holy Spirit and not the priests and Pharisees and teachers of the law who have smothered, and stifled and all but killed the faith.

Perhaps now the fig tree encounter is a little clearer but what are we to make of the last few verses of our passage? It's one thing for a fig tree to wither at Jesus' command but mountains to move at ours? Sure, prayer is powerful, but this must be hyperbole right? And I think that is the essence of the style of language here. Jesus uses it to emphasize that all things are possible not in our own strength, but through the strength of our Lord. And we access his strength through the Holy Spirit and

prayer. Jesus' invitation to ask for whatever we want in his name is an invitation to live kingdom lives, pray kingdom prayers and know that through Jesus and his followers God is working to do extraordinary things in our world. As God's kingdom comes, his will, will be done on earth and in heaven, and mountains will be moved in his name.

Think & Pray

So what do we take from a passage like this today? Here are two things to reflect upon. Firstly, Jesus has turned the religious world upside down. The old fig tree of temple and sacrifice is dead. Christian faith is not us desperately reaching for God through compromised religious practices and human intermediaries, but rather God

reaching for us, forgiving us and calling us to faith in him through Jesus. Are you in a pattern of trying to impress God? Or are you humbly receiving from him that which he has given you and seeking him to change you through his Word and Spirit?

Secondly, today we see that the life of faith is one that starts, continues and ends with Jesus. True spirituality, true fruit in the Christian life, comes through not about placing our faith in ourselves, our church or our minister but placing our faith in Jesus. This is the new life of God's people. To pray prayers in his name is not only to realise Jesus is our way to God the Father but also to see that Jesus and his kingdom are the shape of our most powerful prayers. How many times this week

have you prayed for kingdom opportunities? How many times have you prayed for chances to share your faith and to witness to God's goodness? Perhaps consider what a prayer life focussed on God's kingdom would look like for you and have the courage to seek big things from a God who is greater than we can imagine. And then take the opportunity right now to pray a kingdom prayer such as this.