



## **Matthew 21:18–22**

18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. 20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked. 21 Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, if

you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

## **Reflection**

(Today’s reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

Have you ever heard of the word obsolescence? Let me give you a few items to see if I can jog your memory: the Commodore 64, the 3310 Nokia mobile phone, video players, walkmans and super VGA computer screens. I’m sure you can come up with a bunch more as you reminisce over

the past thirty years.

Obsolescence frequently occurs when a newer model becomes available that tips the balance towards replacing the older model because of new and improved features or simply because the older model is proving expensive to repair or maintain. For example, I remember carting my Sony Sports Walkman around on my belt unfazed by this large lunchbox sized device hanging from side. Today we just plug earphones into our smartphones and we're done.

There are plenty of things that we cringe at when we think of how far we've come in the past thirty years. And whilst computer screens, walkmans and mobile phones are all very novel, the obsolescence that

we see Jesus talking about in today's passage is anything but novel! It is in fact a deeply profound moment in the gospel of Matthew and a movement in religion that will influence the rest of history!

But before we consider the events in Matthew 21:18–22 we must first remind ourselves of the context. Firstly, Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is praised as the king of Israel. Secondly, he has gone to the temple (the centre of Israel's worship) and caused an uproar driving out market owners and rebuking the people for turning God's house into a shopping mall. And most recently, Jesus then heals the blind and lame in the temple courts. In this moment we see the presence of God has arrived and the children are shouting praises to God, but the religious leaders are indig-

nant. With this backdrop in place, Matthew records this bizarre fig tree event.

Now there are a few biblical building blocks that will help us make sense of this. Fig trees were a sign 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, we see judgment language also use the fig tree image. In Jeremiah 8 judgment is spoken upon Israel 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 Matthew'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 saw a faith that was old, tired and cynical.

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 produce is praise, worship and adoration. Instead we have indignation – which, like the barren fig tree – is bearing no fruit at all.

As Jesus curses the fig tree it is his sign to the disciples that the old way of things are over. The temple, the priests, the kings, the prophets, the sacrifices, the teachers of the Law are now obsolete because their fulfilment has arrived. Why did he cause the fig tree to wither and die? Because it is a sign of judgment upon those who refuse to see that God's king has come and a sign of judgment upon those who still insist the temple, the sacrifices and the teachers of the law are God's chosen means of grace.

The back end of this passage proves



equally strange. When asked why Jesus did such a thing, the disciples are told that they can now do something similar, in fact something greater, through the power of prayer. Withering fig trees and moving mountains? What is Jesus on about?

The call to move mountains is a familiar one in Jesus' teaching, he has used it earlier in chapter 17 when the disciples asked why they couldn't heal like Jesus. Ultimately, as strange as Jesus' words sound they are his way of driving the disciples to understand the new life of God's people; a life lived not through faith in temples, priests and sacrifices but rather faith in him. It's not that Jesus necessarily wants them to be moving mountains and withering fig trees but rather that he wants them to see that through him their lives, their ministry,

their purpose and power will take effect. And his invitation to ask for whatever they 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 bring people back into faith with himself.

## **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 but rather God reaching 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 is 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 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.