

Dear Friends,

Mark 11: 15-19

Yesterday, Jesus went to the temple and "looked around at everything". Today, he is back for another visit. On the way he saw a fig tree. He was hungry and hoped to find it bearing fruit. He was disappointed. It had only produced leaves. When he looked at the temple yesterday what did he find? Was it like the tree, plenty of leaves but little actual fruit?

Jesus cursed the fig tree, now he also takes strong action against what he finds in the temple. We might prefer the picture of gentle Jesus meek and mild, but on this occasion, he is angry. The temple is meant to be a place of prayer, for Jews certainly, but for everyone else as well. It has however, become a market where people buy and sell, where transactions take place to exchange everyday money for the special temple currency. Jesus drives out those doing all the buying and selling. He overturns the tables of the money-changers.

Mark doesn't mention the whip. John does when he tells a similar story in his gospel. John puts his account at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than towards its end. He also tells of Jesus making a whip which he uses to drive people out of the temple. Yesterday Jesus came as the peaceful king who gets rid of chariots, war horses and battle bows, today he comes with a whip.

Jesus is certainly challenging the religious leaders who are responsible for what goes on in the temple. But he is also challenging the worshippers. He is not only concerned about how people carry out religious rituals but also about how they live. He quotes words from the prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah heard God say, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". Jeremiah said, "Has this house ... become a den of robbers in your sight?" Jeremiah's words were spoken to all those in the temple. He calls on them to change their ways. His concern is not only about how they practise their religion but also about how they live with others. He calls on them to act justly towards vulnerable people like orphans and widows and to stop oppressing those from outside of their own group. When they fail to treat others well, they become robbers who steal from God what God is due.

Perhaps Jesus clearing the temple also reminded people of the words of another prophet. Malachi looked forward to a time when God would "suddenly come to his temple". On that occasion God would be like a refiner's fire purifying the priests. The people would also be challenged to turn back to God and stop oppressing working people, widows, orphans and their neighbours from other nations.

Jesus has "looked around at everything" in the temple. He has examined it. He has found more leaves than fruit. There are the leaves of worship, but that worship is hollow because it is not accompanied by the fruit of justice.

Another day in Jerusalem comes to an end. Jesus has cursed a fig tree and cleared the temple. He returns to Simon's house. Meanwhile, the powerful religious leaders gather. They decide that Jesus must be destroyed. They make plans to kill him.

God bless you,

Tony