

Reflections for Lent 2021 – Why did Jesus die?
Based on ‘Journey to the Empty Tomb’ by Paula Gooder, Canterbury Press, 2014

Session 2 – The cursing of the Fig Tree, the Cleansing of the Temple and the Parable of the Tenants

- **Read Mark 11.11 – 12.12, and Psalm 118**

One of the striking features of the Rectory garden here in Storrington is the presence of a large and sprawling fig tree. A fig is not a common plant to find in any garden and I have no idea which of my predecessors planted it on a south-facing wall in the garden. Last year it loved the hot sun and produced a good crop of reasonable figs. Monty Don was recommending before Christmas that all the little figs should be removed before spring. His tree is clearly not as tall and sprawling as mine! It is with my fig tree in mind that I read the story in Mark of Jesus cursing the fig tree. Jesus was feeling peckish and, seeing a fig tree in leaf, went in hunt of figs. Mark tells us it wasn't the season for figs so Jesus didn't find any. The disciples heard Jesus declare 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' The next day, after the cleansing of the Temple, Peter saw that the fig tree had withered and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'

It is a strange little story and has to be read in the context of the cleansing of the Temple and the parable of the tenants, together with Psalm 118. You can hear the echoes of Psalm 118 throughout this section of Mark, from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11.1-10) to the stone rejected by the builders becoming the chief cornerstone. But there are some subtle differences highlighted by Mark. Psalm 118 begins as a song of praise for God's help in bringing victory to the (Davidic) king in battle (verses 1-18). Verses 19 onwards recount the king's arrival at the temple gates. In the Psalm the crowds recognise their need of salvation, and the priests recognise their king as God's chosen one. In Mark the crowds briefly hail their king as he enters Jerusalem, but the temple authorities are absent. So Jesus makes his way to the temple and the temple authorities decide that Jesus must die.

In the Old Testament, fig trees and vineyards symbolise God's blessing and abundance and the glorious future that God has in store for his people. Regular reference is made throughout the Old Testament to a lack of figs on the fig trees as a symbol of Israel's spiritual barrenness (Jeremiah 8.13). A fig tree's purpose is to produce figs. This little story is used by Mark to help us understand what Jesus did in the temple. In cleansing the temple Jesus wasn't just objecting to the merchants changing money and selling animals in the precincts. It was rather a more far-reaching critique of the whole temple system.

The Parable of the Tenants in Mark 12.1-12 seems to support this conclusion. The tenants were supposed to guard and tend their master's vineyard and then deliver to him the profits. Instead, they attempted to keep first the profits and then the whole vineyard for themselves. Like the fig tree and the tenants in the vineyard, the temple was no longer doing what it was meant to do. 'The temple was meant to be the gateway to heaven, to be the place where God could be present on earth. As such it should have been the place where God's son, the longed-for king-figure like David, was recognised, welcomed and blessed (as the king was in Psalm 118). But not only did the priests not bless Jesus on his arrival into Jerusalem, they also sought ways to kill him.' (p19f). The ultimate calling of the temple was to become a 'house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56.6-8). Instead, Jesus accuses the temple authorities of stealing the temple and using it for their own political gain. The temple was not doing what it ought to have done and Jesus' action cursed it, like he cursed the fig tree. The fig tree withered and died after it was cursed. Forty years after Jesus' words and actions, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 - about the time that Mark's gospel was probably written.

- **For Reflection:**
- **Read the Cleansing of the Temple in John 2.13-22. What are the similarities and the differences? Does John make a different point in his telling of the story?**
- **Does the institution of the church live up to its calling? Are you faithful to your calling?**