

“My house shall be called a house of prayer ...”

Matthew 21 v 12 to 46

After the triumphal entry, Jesus performs two acts of judgment – he cleanses the temple and he curses a fig tree. Both are contrary to his usual manner of ministry, because he did not come to the world to condemn, but to save (John 3 v 17). Both acts reveal the hypocrisy of Israel – the temple had become a “den of robbers” (Jeremiah 7 v 11), and the nation (symbolised by the fig tree) was without fruit...

Jesus cleanses the temple (Matthew 21 v 12 to 17)

- Why was Jesus so angry at what he found taking place at the temple? In calling the temple a “house of prayer” he is quoting from Isaiah 56 v 7, but notice he calls it “my house”.
- What is the significance of his quotation from Psalm 8 v 2a about “infants and nursing babies”?
- How would you define ‘righteous anger’? Why do we so seldom express it?

Jesus curses the fig tree (Matthew 21 v 18 to 22)

- In what way does the fig tree described here typify Israel as a nation? What was Jesus seeking to teach his disciples from this acted parable?
- What is the connection between Jesus’ cleansing the temple and cursing the fig tree? What kind of fruit was Jesus looking for in Israel?
- What does Jesus teach us about prayer in verses 21 and 22?

Jesus “found nothing on it but only leaves” (v 19). Jesus was looking for the small figs that ripen with the leaves before the main crop. See also Jeremiah 8 v 13, Micah 7 v 1.

There may be a deeper meaning in v 21. As Jesus spoke these words the Mount of Olives would have been in view. Zechariah (14 v 3, 4) prophesied that the Lord would one day return to the Mount of Olives to judge his enemies and establish his kingdom. As his feet touched the Mount, it would move out of the way. So praying to move mountains could mean praying for the day of God’s judgment...

The authority of Jesus challenged (Matthew 21 v 23 to 27)

- The chief priests and the elders of the people come asking a seemingly straightforward question about Jesus’ authority. Why doesn’t Jesus answer them directly?
- What does Jesus’ reply and the subsequent discussion reveal about their true motives?

The parable of the two sons (Matthew 21 v 28 to 32)

- How does this parable, and the teaching that follows, illustrate the principle Jesus gives in Matthew 20 v 16: “the last will be first, and the first last”?
- Why does it seem that preferential treatment is being given to tax collectors and prostitutes?

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The parable of the tenants (Matthew 21 v 33 to 46)

- This parable is rich in meaning, given its allusion to Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5 v 1 to 7). If the tenants are Israel and its religious leaders, who are the owner, the servants and the son?
- How are these religious leaders about to fulfil the scripture (Psalm 118 v 22, 23) Jesus cites in v 42?

Verses 42 to 44: God is referred to as a "rock" (Psalm 18 v 2), and the "spiritual rock" that followed the Israelites in the desert was Christ (1 Corinthians 10 v 4), but to Israel Jesus became a "stumbling block" (1 Corinthians 1 v 23).

Israel rejected her Messiah, but in his death and resurrection Jesus created the Church. To the Church Jesus is the "cornerstone" (Ephesians 2 v 20 to 22, 1 Peter 2 v 4, 5).

And at the end of the age Jesus will come as a stone of judgment, destroying Gentile kingdoms and establishing his own glorious kingdom (Daniel 2 v 34, 44, 45)...