

They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

(Mark 11:27-28)

A startling statistic from the 2011 census was that 5.3 m fewer British-born people said they were ‘Christians’

- Than in 2001, a decline of 15% in just a decade – if the trend continues
- Only a minority of people will describe themselves as ‘Christians’ in the next decade, for the first time
- While immigration is a controversial subject, one thing is for sure – a decade of mass immigration
- as 1.2 m foreign-born Christians, Roman Catholics and evangelicals from Nigeria and other countries
- helped mask the scale of decline in Christian affiliation among the British-born population

Prof. David Coleman, Professor of demography at Oxford University, said: ‘This is a very substantial change

- it is difficult to see whether any other change in the census could have been remotely as big’
- while Cambridge theologian, Dr Fraser Watts said that it was entirely possible
- that people identifying themselves as Christians could become a minority within the next decade
- ‘in many churches the majority of the congregation are over 60’
- While responses from many Christian leaders were, in my opinion, predictably delusional
- A more realistic response stated, ‘the challenge of the church is to reconnect with the nominal’

Following his account of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Mark offers three short narratives

- Jesus cursing the fig tree and teaching on prayer, his visit to the temple and a discussion of authority
- At first, there appears to be no common theme – but are they in fact an observation on Israel?
- And because of that, do they have anything to say to us regarding the state of the church?

I OUTWARD DIMENSION: FRUITLESS

Bethany was the usual place that Jesus stayed when in Jerusalem and hunger is a basic human characteristic

- But until we see this incident as an acted parable we will not be focusing on the right questions
- It is absurd to think that a country person like Jesus would not have known at what time figs were ripe
- Being in leaf, the tree gave an outward promise of fruit but nothing more – but as Jesus looked
- It did not even have the small ‘early ripe’ figs (cf. Hos. 9:10) that normally accompanied the leaves
- The judgment of Jesus surprises us but only perpetuates the tree’s current condition

Mark’s style of sandwiching another story into a longer section gives us a clue as to the meaning of the incident

- The withering of the fig tree is part of the same narrative as the visit to the temple
- The next morning, Jesus and his disciples passed the fig tree again to see it withered from its roots
- Jesus’ predicted judgment on the temple will come as surely as the withering of the fig tree.

If the tree represented the temple, focus of the religious life of Israel, we can understand what the action meant

- ‘It symbolises the hypocrisy and sham of the nation of Israel’ (Wessel)
- There was religious profession in plenty but in reality it was fruitless
- A people which honoured God with their lips but whose heart was all the time far from him (Mk. 7:6)
- Physical judgment, in the form of the Roman destruction of the city and its temple would come in AD 70
- ‘Like tree, like temple; like temple, like nation; the parallel is exact’ (Cole)
- Now our responsibility is to look for fruitfulness within the life of the church
- If the great commission of the church is to ‘make disciples’ (Mt. 28:19) – and it is not making many
- the present-day church (certainly in Britain) must face the reality of the challenge of this passage

II UPWARD DIMENSION: PRAYERLESS

It seems as if the subject changes as Jesus uses the incident to illustrate the effectual nature of prayer

- but the subject is still judgment as time can run out for fruitless trees and prayerless temples
- as is often the case, the danger is to misquote what the Bible says, or to follow an oft repeated misquote
- Jesus does not speak about mountains in general, but about ‘this mountain’, the temple mount, Zion
- Jesus has shown that the work of the temple has become fruitless – that work will now discontinue
- because by his death, the anticipated blood sacrifice has been offered perfectly and completely
- and because his presence cannot be confined to the temple any more than it could be confined to the tomb
- the holy place is wherever the gospel of Jesus is preached, wherever his people gather

The focus of prayer is to have faith in God – because Jesus died on the cross, access to God is open for all

- his death creates a new house of prayer, a temple not made with hands, and a new relationship with God
- a relationship that is based on prayer and forgiveness and its resulting kingdom community
- ‘Prayer is like a boat hook that a boatman uses to pull the craft to its anchoring place.
- The boatman does not try to pull the shore to the boat, but the other way around.
- So in prayer we should draw ourselves to God and not try to pull God down to us’ (David Garland).

So the passage is a challenge to prayerlessness – we are not invited to attempt miracles or perform tricks

- The metaphor is not literal, we are not asked to pray for mountains (or paper clips, Plass) to be moved
- Jesus is saying that the greatest possible difficulties can be removed when a person has faith
- What we ask must be compatible with the teaching, life and death of Jesus – and we must forgive
- Unless we forgive others freely, it shows that we have no consciousness of the grace we have received
- If invited to describe the church today as prayerful or prayerless, which would it be?

III INWARD DIMENSION: POWERLESS

Sandwiched into the story of the cursing of the fig tree is what is often called ‘the cleansing of the temple’

- (Hooker) ‘as an act of reforming zeal it would have to be judged a failure:
- the money changers no doubt soon recovered their coins, and the place was restored to order.’
- In any event, why would Jesus attempt to cleanse something, that he predicts will soon be destroyed?
- But Jesus is not intending to reform the temple but to denounce its corruption
- It is because the role which it is not fulfilling all that well is coming to an end

The quotation from Isaiah (56:7) is a reminder that God did not intend the temple to become a national shrine

- At the time of Jesus, the temple had become a national symbol that divided Israel from the nations
- Instead of being what God intended, ‘a house of prayer for all nations’, a place of prayer and teaching
- The Court of the Gentiles had become nothing other than a market robbing the Gentiles of their privilege
- With a quotation from Jeremiah (7:11), Jesus denounces the temple as a ‘den of robbers’
- This is not so much a description of those who extorted money through money changing and temple tax
- As to say that those who did not live lives honouring to God were hiding behind the holiness of the temple
- The temple, a place that represented God’s holiness had become a sanctuary for bandits

The Pharisees and Herodians wanted rid of Jesus, the chief priests and teachers of the law join them (11:18)

- The temple represented Jewish life and religion and Jesus has clashed with it
- the place intended for all nations to pray was being misused by the Jews for trade (and profit)
- I think that we ought not to be too precious about our buildings – what concerns me is our people
- Are we ‘as people’ guilty of spending too much time on the wrong things, even at church
- When our real focus should be elsewhere – are we prayerless and therefore powerless?

IV FORWARD DIMENSION: LEADERLESS

It is only fair to say that this conflict had been brewing for some time

- Starting to understand Jesus' words and actions, the religious leaders look for a way to kill him (11:18)
- Earlier the Pharisees and Herodians were considering how they might kill Jesus (3:6)
- The question is focused on the authority of Jesus – where does he get the authority to do this?
- As lawyers are apt to do, the scribes continually quoted precedents (1:22)
- But Jesus claimed, and clearly displayed, God's direct authority
- This authority drew disciples (4:41) but repelled those who rejected his Lordship

A direct answer to the question on authority might have precipitated his arrest and death

- So instead of answering directly, Jesus says his authority is from the same source as John the Baptist
- It was popularly believed that John came from God but his critics could not say that
- Neither could they say that he was not from God for fear of the crowd – so they said they did not know
- Unimpressed by deliberate, pretended ignorance, Jesus refused to tell them his source of authority either

The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders (11:27), made up the Jewish ruling council (Sanhedrin)

- It is clear that the controversy will continue – it is a matter of authority and leadership
- The disciples are following the leadership of Jesus
- At a low point in Jewish history, leadership is not provided by an earthly king
- Herod may have been king in name but he was only a puppet of Rome and the Empire
- The true king was there before them – later in the Gospel narrative it will be revealed
- Jesus was not put to death for what he did but for who he was (Mk 15:2, 9, 12, 18)
- 'The written notice of the charge against him read: The King of the Jews' (Mk 15:26).

Born in Burnley, into a devout Methodist family, 8-year-old Samuel Chadwick started work in the mill

- In his mid-twenties, Samuel had a great Christian experience and was later ordained (in 1890)
- And after serving in Leeds, Samuel Chadwick became principal of Cliff College in 1913. He wrote:

The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.

Across the Atlantic, Canadian pastor, preacher and Christian leader, Oswald J. Smith

- Produced a book of daily readings entitled, *I have walked alone with Jesus*
- And the first entry reads like this:

‘Intercessory prayer is without doubt not only the highest form of Christian service but also the hardest kind of work. To the person who is not an intercessor, such a statement seems absurd. Prayer to most people is looked upon as an easy occupation – that’s because they know nothing at all of the ministry of intercession. Their prayers for the most part are centred upon themselves, their loved ones, their own personal interests and an occasional petition for the perishing world. Their prayer life is spasmodic; it is considered a side issue and is readily neglected if other things demand attention. Such a person is in no way affecting the kingdom of Satan – hence prayer, so called, is easy. Prayer-less work will be powerless and fruitless. If Satan can keep us so busy we do not have time to pray, he will have accomplished his purpose. Intercessory prayer is work. It is battle, and the world we live in today desperately needs the work of the Holy Spirit. We can turn on the news at any time and are given plenty of reason to make intercessory prayer a must in our lives. However, we cannot make the mistake of thinking prayer is powerful. It is God alone who is powerful, and the measure of our prayer lives will be to the measure of our fruitfulness and intimacy with Him.’