

## Thoughts From Other Minds:

The second event that demands our attention in these verses is *our Lord's curse upon the fruitless fig-tree*. We are told that being hungry, He came to a fig-tree in the way and "found nothing thereon but leaves only and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig-tree withered away." ... that withered fig-tree ... preaches a sermon we shall do well to hear.

That fig-tree, full of leaves, but barren of fruit, was a striking emblem of the Jewish Church, when our Lord was upon earth. The Jewish Church had everything to make an outward show: it had the temple, the priest-hood, the daily service, the yearly feasts, the Old Testament Scriptures, the courses of the Levites, the morning and evening sacrifice. But beneath these goodly leaves, the Jewish Church was utterly destitute of fruit. It had no grace, no faith, no love, no humility no spirituality, no real holiness, no willingness to receive its Messiah (John 1:11.) And hence, like the fig-tree, the Jewish Church was soon to wither away. It was to be stripped of all its outward ornaments, and its members scattered over the face of the earth; Jerusalem was to be destroyed; the temple was to be burned; the daily sacrifice was to be taken away; the tree was to wither down to the very ground. And so it came to pass: never was there a type so literally fulfilled. ...

But we may not stop here. We may find even more instruction in the event we are now considering. These things were written for our sakes as well as for the Jews.

Is not every fruitless branch of Christ's visible Church in awful danger of becoming a withered fig tree? Beyond doubt it is. High ecclesiastical profession, without holiness among a people - overweening confidence in councils, bishops, liturgies, and ceremonies, while repentance and faith have been neglected, - have ruined many a visible Church in time past, and may yet ruin many more. Where are the once famous Churches of Ephesus and Sardis, and Carthage, and Hippo? They are all gone. They had leaves, but no fruit. Our Lord's curse came upon them: they became withered fig-trees. ... Let us remember this. Let us beware of church-pride: let us not be high-minded, but fear. (Rom. 11:20.)

Finality, is not every fruitless professor of Christianity in awful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? There can be no doubt of it. So long as a man is content with the mere leaves of religion, - with a name to live while he is dead, and a form of godliness without the power, - so long his soul is in great peril. So long as he is satisfied with going to church or chapel, or receiving the Lord's Supper, and being called a Christian while his heart is not changed, and his sins not forsaken, - so long he is daily provoking God to cut him off without remedy. Fruit, fruit, - the fruit of the Spirit is the only sure proof that we are savingly united to Christ, and in the way to heaven. May this sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten!

J C Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Matthew, pp. 269-271.

## Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

20 March 2016—Palm Sunday

**Sermon:** "Responding to the King"

**Scripture:** Matthew 21:1-22, 23-46

### Sermon Notes

**Introduction:** The way Jesus entered Jerusalem on the day we call 'Palm Sunday' was an 'action sermon' to the Jews that Jesus was their King. He had begun his public work speaking to the people; soon he attracted the attention of the religious leaders; from the beginning they were hostile to him.

They thought God was pleased with them for keeping his law—but Jesus criticised their righteousness (Matt 5:20). He also warned the people against imitating hypocrites (Matt 6:1-2); everyone knew he meant the scribes and the Pharisees—and they were angry!

They followed Jesus around with hostile intent. They were there when he told a crippled man that his sins were forgiven—and said he was blaspheming; only God can forgive sins—but although Jesus proved his right to forgive by healing the man, they did not believe in him (Matt 9:2-7).

The continually attacked Jesus; accusing him of breaking the Sabbath; of casting out demons by the power of Satan, of allowing his disciples to break the traditions of the elders, demanding signs of his authority while they ignored the miracles he did. And Jesus opposed them, accusing them of breaking God's commandments.

But he had not formally stated his claim to be their king, and so they had not formally responded to that claim. Jesus knew what would happen when he did make that claim (Matt 20:18-19) - but the claim had to be made, for he was their King, and it was right that he should openly claim their loyalty and their worship.

### 1. Revelation

So for the first time in his public ministry Jesus openly and unmistakably identified himself as the King of Israel by fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy of the coming of the King (Zech 9:9, Matt 21:4-5).

Unlike the people and their leaders, his disciples had believed in him as Messiah the King. Although they didn't understand what it meant for him to be their king they did believe he was their King, and they did believe he would have a kingdom!

The Lord was the King of Israel (cf. 1 Sam 8:7) - and who but the Lord could know where they would find the donkeys and that if he said 'The Lord needs them' their owners would send them at once?

His disciples trusted him, and so when he sent two of them to get the donkeys they went as he directed them; they brought the donkey and its colt, and put their cloaks on the colt as a makeshift saddle, and Jesus said on them.

So the King of Israel came as the Holy Spirit had said he would come—not on a prancing war horse but ‘humble, and mounted on a donkey’, not to give a military deliverance, but to call his people to faith in himself as the Lord their King.

## 2. Response

His disciples didn’t understand (Jn 12:6) - but the ride was not for them, but for the people and their leaders. The road to Jerusalem would have been crowded with pilgrims—so soon Jesus was the centre of a vast crowd of enthusiastic and apparently welcoming people (Matt 21:8-9).

It was impressive but unsatisfactory, for they hadn’t really understood who Jesus was, and they didn’t really receive him as their king; they thought of him as a prophet (Matt 21:10, 46). Why couldn’t they see the obvious, that he was much more than a prophet, that he was the Lord their King?

He had called them to repentance, to turn from their sins to God, but they would not repent (Matt 11:20-24). When the disciples asked Jesus why he taught the people in parables, he said he did so because ‘seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand’ (Matt 13:10-15).

It is dangerous to shut our eyes to the truth, to refuse to repent when God calls us to repent, to say ‘no’ to him, for if we refuse to see, he may give us blindness. No generation had ever had such spiritual light as that generation had, but they preferred their sins to repentance.

Instead of acting like a ‘king’ and going to the places of power, Jesus went to the Temple, to alienate the influential and the powerful by driving out those who bought and sold there, and by welcoming the nobodies of society—the blind and the lame and the children. Disappointed in Jesus, they preferred Barabbas.

Their leaders were proud of their righteousness, and hated Jesus for exposing their hypocrisy, and so while they saw the wonderful things Jesus did, they ignored them to condemn him for accepting the praise of children who saw what they would not see, that Jesus was the Son of David, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Once the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites and they were like Canaanites—but when Jesus came as their King they had long since put aside idolatry and its immorality, so that outwardly they carefully kept God’s law; but Jesus found them like the fig-tree that left him hungry, leaves, but no fruit.

They looked like God’s people, but they had no fruit of obedience of God; they were respectable and religious, but they refused Jesus because they wanted a king who would give them glory and allow them to keep their sins.

So Palm Sunday is more for the church than the world; on this day Jesus comes to us, to ask us, “Am I really your king, or are you only respectable and religious? Have you heard my call to repentance and faith, or do you love some sin more than me?” How sad it would be if at the judgment we had ‘nothing but leaves’!

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## *My Notes:*

### *Questions for Reflection:*

1. Read and reflect upon Matthew 3:1-2 and Matthew 4:12-17, and Matthew 11:1-24. What do these reveal about the focus of Jesus’ ministry, its ‘success’ and the spiritual state of the people to whom Jesus offered himself as King?
2. Read and reflect upon Matthew 3:7-10, Matthew 5:20 and Matthew 6:1—and then consider the following interactions between Jesus and the scribes and / or the Pharisees: 9:11, 34; 12:2, 9-14, 24, 33-42; 15:1-14; 21:15, 23-25. What was the root cause of the hostility of the scribes and / or the Pharisees to Jesus?
3. Jesus said ‘world ... hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil’ (John 7:7). Read and reflect upon Matthew 10:16-42 and 1 Peter 4:12-19; how might this help us to be faithful followers of Jesus the King?
4. Read and reflect upon Jesus’ parables of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32) and of the Tenants (Matt 21:33-46); how do these passages of scripture help us rightly understand Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree? How do these parables speak to us? Where might we find ourselves in them?