The King Who Seeks, Cleanses and Loves
Mark 11:1-26

Imagine you're reading a biography, and you're about 2/3rds through when you realise the author has devoted the entire last third of the book to just one week of the subject's life. What conclusion would you draw?

Probably that those 7 days are crucial for understanding why this person is famous; why they're worth writing a biography about in the first place.

And that's what we're dealing with in Mark's gospel. Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem, he arrives, and from now on Mark dedicates the last third of the book to the last week of Jesus' life. Which tells you, you've got to understand his last week, if you want to understand his life.

And all the action centres in and around Jerusalem. Or, more precisely, the Temple in Jerusalem and the leaders of that temple.

And it would be easy to think that events surrounding a temple, destroyed 2000 years ago, has very little to do with you. Except, today's passage says otherwise. Because if you look at it, it tells you there's someone who claims your allegiance; someone who claims the right to examine your life. But also someone who opens the door to a fruitfulness in your life that no amount of busyness can ever give you.

The King Who Comes
One of the striking things about Mark's gospel so far is *the Messianic Secret*. Jesus heals someone and the person concerned, or their family members, are desperate to tell others, and Jesus says, 'no, tell no one.' Demons know who he is, but he forbids them to tell anyone else. A public relations guru will tell you there's no such thing as bad publicity, but Jesus refuses all publicity.

But now all that changes. He reaches the Mount of Olives on the outskirts of Jerusalem and sends two disciples on a mission: v2, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it."

Now, you might think this is nothing more than the first century equivalent of getting an Uber. Except, it's one week before Passover, and there's a steady stream of pilgrims taking the road down to Jerusalem. And the rabbis taught that all pilgrims should enter the city on foot. Which should not be a problem for Jesus, because he's gone everywhere on foot. Except, he calls for a donkey.

Then there's the way he obtains it. He tells the disciples that if anyone stops them taking it they're to say, v3, 'The Lord has need of it' and that'll do the trick. Now if you found someone trying to take your car, and they said that, would you go, 'oh, sure, the Lord, off you go!'? I doubt it. But in ancient times, kings had the power of requisition. They could commandeer a beast of burden and say, 'I need that' and its owner would go, 'sure', because he's the king.

Then notice how Jesus describes the colt, it's one, v2, 'On which no one has ever sat.' And an animal who had not yet been broken in was considered sacred. It's why unbroken oxen were used to pull the carriage carrying the ark of the covenant.

And so here is Jesus, setting himself apart from every one else, using a king's prerogative, and riding an unbroken animal. And as he does, v8, 'Many spread their cloaks on the road' - as they give him the red-carpet treatment.

Because none of the symbolism is lost on them, is it? You see, Mark doesn't quote the prophet Zechariah, but you can almost guarantee the crowd are thinking about him.

Zechariah 9:9. 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

It's why they call out the words of Psalm 118 as he rides, v9-10, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

And unlike every other time, Jesus doesn't stop them. They know he's the Messiah, the great king in David's line who has come to put everything right, and they're singing about it. And Jesus doesn't stop them.

He's happy for this to be the first public declaration that he really is the King over every King, the One who, in the words of Zechariah, will 'rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth' (Zech 9:10).

But look how he makes that statement. On the back of a donkey, not a warhorse. As the king coming humbly. I wonder how many modern would-be leaders would take that path. But As JC Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool wrote, Jesus' life began in a manger, and it draws to its close on a donkey.

Because this is the king who combines power with humility. The king who, in Zechariah's words, 'will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations." (Zech 9:10). Because he is the Prince of Peace.

Now, the last week has given ample opportunity to reflect on the example and influence of our leaders. And a nation's love for its Queen, or the enthusiasm for an elected leader who *this time* is going to be *it*, or the cynicism we feel when they let us down, all tell us that something inside us longs for the perfect leader.

The problem is, no earthly monarch or politician, however good, can ever be that leader. Instead, Mark is saying, here he is. Look at him. The King over every king, yet humble. All powerful yet peaceful. Tolerating no evil yet tender. Always right yet always righteous. And he does not need to seek re-election or bow to the whims of public opinion. Because he's the King.

But there's a problem with kings, isn't there? They demand your loyalty. And if Christ really is the King over every king, we owe him our allegiance. An allegiance that's not divided with a political party or elected politician, the media we consume or the social commentators we listen to. But him who is shaping our characters, our loves, our ambitions and our priorities. The King who claims ownership of every part of our lives.

The King who Seeks

Now, the way Matthew and Luke describe it, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem really was triumphal. The city's agog, anticipation is at fever pitch. If the crowd weren't crying the stones would.

But not Mark. The way Mark tells it, it all ends in anti-climax.

Verse 11, 'And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany.'

There's an English nursery rhyme that goes, 'The grand old duke of York, he had 10,000 men, he marched them up to the top of the hill… and he marched them down again.' It's a picture of a pointless military exercise.

And Jesus does the same, only in reverse. He comes down the hill from Bethany, enters the temple, has a look round, nothing happens, it's getting dark, so he heads back up the hill again.

Now, the gospel has been building to this point. Who is this man? The Messiah! Where's he going? Jerusalem. And he gets there, and then… he leaves again. Is that it?

Why does Mark present it like this?

Because it's what doesn't happen that's so telling. Here is the king come to his city. Here is God's Son come to his Temple, and where are the leaders to welcome him? Mark tells us Jesus looked around. Not like a tourist or even a pious pilgrim come to see the great sites, but as a king come to his house. And what does he see? The great and the good, the chief priests and teachers of the law lined up ready to greet him as a welcome committee, ready to pledge their allegiance? No. What he likely sees is the excrement left by the animals sold there and the pens that held them. And he turns and leaves.

But if you noticed, that wasn't the only time Jesus went looking for something. Verse 12-13, 'On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.'

So, Jesus is hungry and he sees a fig tree. And it's Spring time and the tree has leaves on it, which means it should also have the buds that in time will develop into figs. They're not figs yet, but they are edible, and Jesus is hoping to eat them. But while this tree has leaves, it has no buds and so, v14, 'he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And he curses it, and the next day, v20, 'They saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.'

Now, do you ever get hangry? We can be out on a family hike or something, and one of us has skipped breakfast, and they just start getting grumpy. And, typically, it takes a while for the rest of us to realise what's going on, but when we do, everyone else springs into action, quick, someone give her some calories, that'll sort it!

Is this just Jesus being hangry? He hasn't had breakfast so he's grumpy. Because at first glance this doesn't reflect well on him does it? The British Atheist, Betrand Russell used this episode as one reason he couldn't believe in Jesus. His character was suspect. Because if he has the power to kill the tree, why not use that power to make it bear fruit? Why not use his power for life, not death?

A few years ago Su and I made our first, and only trip to California. And before we went some friends said, you've got to go to In Out Burgers, they're awesome. And you've got to have their

animal fries, they're unbelievable! And we did. Let's just say it was an experience that we will remember for years! But if In Out Burgers are famous for their fries, Mark is famous for his sandwiches. And more than once, Mark places one episode in between the two parts of another episode. And the two parts help explain what's going on in the episode in the middle and vice versa.

And here, Mark divides the cursing of the fig tree in two and sandwiches the clearing out of the temple between it. And he does so to help us see what Jesus is doing in the temple. That he's the king come seeking fruit.

The King who Judges
Verse 15-16, 'And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.'

Now, if you were a pilgrim, coming to worship, and you didn't want to bring your own animal with you, to be able to buy one for sacrifice at the temple would be a convenience. And every man over 20 had to pay the annual temple tax, as a token of their ransom by God, that supported the temple and paid the salaries of the priests. And that tax had to be paid with a Tyrian half-shekel, the closest thing available to the Hebrew shekel commanded by the law. But unless you came from Tyre you were unlikely to have one, so money changers helpfully provided that service.

And in the past, the animal sellers and money changers had plied their trade along the approach roads to Jerusalem. But recently, supposedly to help the pilgrims and no doubt take a cut of the profits, Caiaphas, the high priest, had invited them into the outer court of the temple - the court of the gentiles. The one place in the whole temple complex where non-Jews could come and worship.

And Jesus returns to the temple and starts driving out the animal sellers. But did you notice, not just the sellers, but those who bought them - pilgrims. And he overturns the tables of the money-changers, who were there to help people obey God's law.

So what's he doing?

Three things. He's restoring the court of the gentiles. You see, there was a popular expectation that when Messiah came he would cleanse the temple of foreigners. But Jesus comes and does the reverse. He cleanses the temple *for* foreigners. It's why he quotes Isaiah the prophet in v17 and says, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all nations*' (Is 56). And when the Lord first says that through Isaiah, he's talking of the messianic age, when not just Jews but those the Jews considered outsiders will all be gathered to worship in God's house. And as Jesus clears their court he's saying, those days have come.

Secondly, as the fig-tree sandwich tells us, he's come seeking fruit and not found it. And just as the fig tree had leaves so the temple is a hive of activity. All the outward trappings of religion are there - sacrifices are being made, the temple tax is being paid, but instead of finding fruit Jesus says, v17, they 'have made it a den of robbers.'

And that's not just a condemnation of the profiteering going on. He's quoting the prophet Jeremiah, and in Jeremiah's day the leaders and people were saying that there was no way judgement was

coming and Jerusalem could fall to her enemies because they had the temple of the Lord. While all the time they were worshipping their idols and murdering and lying and committing adultery. They were no better than a company of thieves. Sure, they had the temple, but their lives were anything but consistent with worship of the God whose temple it was.

And so as he purges the temple, Jesus is condemning a religion of false appearances, that shows signs of life on the outside but is dead on the inside. A religion that has leaves but no fruit.

But, of course, the same is possible today. We can come to church, maybe even make sacrifices of time and money, but what really has our hearts are our idols. Those things other than God that we look to for significance or security. Those things that really shape us, and drive our loves and desires. Like the hunger for the commendation of others. Or the desire for control. Or the endless pursuit of more. And those things can shape a person's character, or the way they treat others, more than the God they come to worship. The leaves are there, but the fruit is lacking.

In one of his letters to the seven churches in Revelation, Jesus says, 'All the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works' (Rev 2:23). So as Jesus searches our hearts and minds this morning, what does he find?

But, thirdly, as he cleanses the temple, it's a foretaste of the judgement that's going to come on the temple and her leaders. Because what Jesus has just done is stop the flow of sacrificial animals - buyers and sellers. And he's overturned the financial system that pays for it all. And so this isn't Jesus restoring temple worship, but foreshadowing it's destruction. As he cursed the fig tree, so the withering of the tree of temple worship has begun.

But if you're on the receiving end of a critique like that, whether then or now, you can react against it, can't you. Verse 18, 'And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.' Because when your idols are power, or influence, or standing in the eyes of others, you'll lash out at anything that threatens them.

And yet, how can Jesus threaten the end of the temple when it was *the* way for people to approach God, and have their sins forgiven, and worship him?

The King who Gives

Well, the triumphal entry happens on the Sunday and the cleansing of the temple on the Monday of Jesus' last week. But on the Friday, the plans of the leaders to destroy Jesus will bear fruit.

And as Jesus clears the temple with a whip, so a whip will be taken to his back. And as he drives buyers and sellers from the temple court, so the leaders will drive him out, not of the temple but the city. And here he comes humbly, riding a donkey, but his greatest act of humility comes as he humbles himself to death, even death on a cross. And as he curses the fig tree, so at the cross he becomes a curse - as he becomes *the* atoning sacrifice for sin that all these animal sacrifices were only ever pointing to. As he gives, not a shekel, but his life in place of ours.

And at his death, the great curtain that divided the Most Holy Place - the dwelling place of God - from the rest of the Temple was torn in two - because the way to God had been opened.

You see, Jesus said of himself that one greater than the temple is here. The ultimate dwelling place of God among men. The one through whom our sins are forgiven and the condemnation for our lack of fruit is removed. Because the king doesn't just seek, he saves.

And when you see how he gave himself for you, you'll give yourself to him. He'll have your loyalty. Not out of fear but out of love. And you'll bear fruit.

Seeing how he humbled himself for you will humble you, and lay an axe to the root of your pride. Seeing how he sacrificed all for you will fill your heart with love for him and for others - and you'll sacrifice, not to earn his love but because you have his love. Seeing that the Prince of Peace has made peace between you and God, it'll give you peace - peace from the endless striving of religion to prove yourself to God, and from the need to prove yourself to others. Because you'll know he already approves of you. And that will make you a person of peace, because you won't need to get your significance from putting others down but instead can build them up.

And it won't just be your character that bears fruit, but your prayers.

Peter sees the fig tree withered, says 'Rabbi, look!' and Jesus replies, v22, "Have faith in God" and you'll see mountains move. Things that seem impossible in your own strength will become possible as you trust in God's power rather than trust or seek your own. As you come trusting, not in your right to be heard, but in the righteousness of your king. And that'll mean you can approach his throne in prayer with boldness and confidence.

It's why Jesus says in v24, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Because when he's your king, when your character is being shaped by his, your wants will be too. And increasingly you'll pray in line with his desires, that his kingdom would come and his will be done. And those are prayers he delights to answer.

But the prayer that bears fruit doesn't just require faith, Jesus says it requires forgiveness. Verse 25, 'And whenever you stand praying, forgive.' As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, you can have mountain-moving faith but if you don't have the love that's patient and kind and keeps no record of wrong, you're nothing. But your heart can be filled with that love, and you can show that mercy, as you see how Christ the king has loved and been merciful to you.