

The Park Church
Adult Study Group
“Understanding Holy Week”
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.
March 1 – April 4, 2009

Monday – Mark 11: 12 – 19

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?’

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

To Reiterate the significance of Palm Sunday: “Jesus triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission.”

Monday’s cleansing of the temple is also misunderstood by most readers. More later.

Markan “Frames”

This is a literary device in which two events are intertwined so that they interpret each other.

From the Fig Tree Learn its Lessons

Hints about whether to read something literally or metaphorically. That it was not the season for figs is a hint to take this story metaphorically. So in this “frame” the tree and the temple interpret each other symbolically.

Jesus’ reaction to the unfruitful tree indicates that the temple is not being “cleansed”, but destroyed. (Remember, Mark is being written in about 70 A.D., right about the time that the temple was finally destroyed by the Romans.)

The Meaning of Blood Sacrifice

1. Killing animals for food was normal.
2. Human beings create, maintain, and restore relationships with gifts and food.
3. Sacrifice as “gift” – the animal was given to God by having it burned on the altar...

4. Then it was returned to the offerer as divine food for a feast with God – more like God inviting the offerer to a meal.

Sacrifice is to “make sacred” – so blood sacrifice is not to be confused with suffering or substitution.

Example of the firefighter.

So Jesus was not taking a position against blood sacrifice when he entered the temple and turned over the tables.

It was more about **the Priesthood and the Temple**

Priests traditionally had a sacred role, not a political one, but under the Romans, the governor had assumed the role of appointing priests, so the sacred perspective could no longer be used to challenge the principles and activities of the government.

In short, the priest who represented the Jews before God on the Day of Atonement also represented them before Rome the rest of the year –

The temple was ambiguous, too, because the Court of the Gentiles had the symbol of Rome’s primary God, Jupiter, on it. Those Jews who had tried to tear it down for religious reasons were executed. So was this a temple of Yahweh or a temple of Jupiter?

A Den of Robbers

This phrase comes from Jeremiah 7, where the context shows that the robbery does not take place in the temple, but it is the place of refuge for those whose whole life is robbery of the poor. Many prophetic writings demonstrate that Justice is the primary form of proper worship, so those who maintain unjust systems cannot run to the temple to have their injustice legitimated.

Remember that one of the elements of domination systems is the religious legitimization of oppression. This is how the temple functioned in Jesus’ day.

Said differently, worship or union with a God of justice empowers the worshipper for a life of justice.

Furthermore, Jeremiah teaches us that if God’s temple is used as a place where worship is substituted for justice, God will destroy that temple, since it has become a haven for perpetrators of injustice and a den for robbers.

Jesus criticizes not only violent domination, but any religious collaboration with it – he also stands against those forms of Christianity that were used throughout the centuries to support imperial violence and injustice.

(How is the church doing today?)