

Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, Jesus went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Mark 11.13.

When I was a child, I always loved Palm Sunday the best. It was the only time we got to sing that majestic hymn, 'All glory, laud, and honour'. We got palm crosses, of course, but to my boyish mind, Palm Sunday was the only time when everyone cheered Jesus to the rafters; it was the only time everyone publicly and openly welcomed him, as I had welcomed him into my childish, little heart. Jesus meant everything to me as a little boy. On Palm Sunday I felt that everyone else thought the same as me as they all shouted out: 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest'.

But, of course, it didn't last long, did it? Within days that same crowd were shouting, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' And the mood of jubilation soon changed when Jesus went into the Temple to pray and was appalled at what he found. Instead of a house of prayer, he found a den of thieves. You see, under the Roman occupation, Roman coins were used - *except* in the Temple. Worshippers could buy their animals for sacrifice only in the Temple, and only with Jewish coins, which could only be changed, (guess where?) within the Temple. The Romans had given the Jewish religious leaders a licence to print money.

And the worst of it was that this commercial racket took place within the Temple area known as the Court of the Gentiles. Heaven forbid that such money-grubbing would take place within the areas exclusively for use by Jews! Put the stalls up in the *Gentile* area. Who cares about them? And so, because of their greed, the Gentiles, whom God had included in

his saving plan, were excluded, *Mark 11.17*, p1016...

How could these holy men, these religious leaders of God's people, have got it so wrong? How was it that they had completely forgotten why they were there? Worse even than that, they had actually become an *obstruction* to worship. Their greed had prevented prayer and shut out the Gentiles from the only area they were allowed in. No wonder Jesus noticed the tree luxuriant with foliage but with no fruit. That's just how the Jewish religion was: impressive, but there was nothing there. And so Jesus cursed it, yes, *cursed* it. The next day they saw that the poor tree was withered *from the roots*, v20... Jesus's cursing of the fig-tree was obviously an acted-out parable: the Temple was all show and no substance.

Well, so what? you might be saying now. When I look around the state of our churches here in Britain, I think of trees covered in leaves but with no fruit. We have all the splendid buildings and the lovely services, but so many of our churches are empty or nearly empty. We have 24 bishops in the House of Lords; we have Speaker's Chaplains in the Commons. One day the new monarch will be crowned in Westminster Abbey by the Abp of Canterbury in a service of ancient majesty. And yet what difference is the Church *really* making in our society? For all the show, is anyone really looking - or listening?

Jesus was completely unsentimental. He saw that the Temple, in Jerusalem, the very centre of the Jewish religion, was useless, and he cursed it. He cursed the fig-tree, and not

long afterwards, in the year AD70, it happened. The Romans razed the Temple to the ground. It would never rise again.

And it had happened before, 600 years earlier, when King Nebuchadnezzar burned the beautiful Temple of Solomon to the ground. When things cease to serve God, God destroys them. In *John* 15 Jesus famously said that he was the Vine and the Father the gardener. Useless branch will be lopped off.

At the beginning of my ministry I used to look on congregations shrinking and churches closing as a tragedy. Now, in the light of Jesus the Vine, I see that Jesus is merely keeping his promise. Solomon's Temple was burned down by the Babylonians, just as God had warned. The next Temple was destroyed by the Romans, just as Jesus had said. And churches in our own country are closing. As Jesus said in *John* 15.2: 'he cuts off every branch that bears no fruit'.

So, why are so many churches in the West shrinking? Just like the Temple authorities, they have forgotten what they are for. They have become an *obstacle* to people coming to faith. And the basic reason is that they have forgotten about Jesus. We are used to hearing the Abp of Canterbury talking about such things as having sharia law, but when do we hear our national church leaders call the nation to turn to *Jesus*? Of course, most people will ignore them, but at least that's what they would *expect* them to say. After all, it's their job. But no. It wasn't so long ago that the Abp of Canterbury was apologising, yes, *apologising*, for the Trinity being offensive to people of other religions. When you stop having confidence

in your core product, you shouldn't really be surprised when your sales figures go down, should you?

If you read the letters page of our URC magazine, *Reform*, you will wonder whether our people even believe in God. Too many don't see Jesus as the Son of God, the Saviour of the world and Lord. I despair when I read letter from people who reckon to be Christians but who are frankly embarrassed by Jesus' dying on the Cross for our sins: all that blood! And I am afraid that, out of fear of 'offending' other people, too many in our churches will not accept that the only way you can fully see God is by looking at Jesus. This is mainstream Bible, but too many of us don't believe it. We're embarrassed by Jesus' own recorded words. Our churches in Britain, then, have the outward form but not the inner conviction; they are trees with leaves but with no fruit on them. They are cursed.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem. He seems to be riding *out* of many of our churches. We are busy doing good works in the community, but Jesus doesn't feature. We're going the way of the Temple. It happened then with the Babylonians and the Romans. Why shouldn't it happen today? God is not mocked. We need to rediscover Jesus. He is what it's all about. He needs to be the centre of our church-life. We need to talk about him more, and name the name of Jesus. If people are offended, tough. And we as individuals need to come to know him personally. Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Do you speak to him? listen to him? follow him each day? Start by dusting down those Bibles and reading them each day. Make time to talk to God in prayer, and ask for the Holy

Spirit in your lives. Jesus rode into Jerusalem 2000 years ago. Let him ride into your life today and reign as King.