

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Glory, Power, Authority and Prayer

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Sunday 16th September 2012

Mark 11:1-33

Part 1 V:1-11, 15-19

How do you pray? What do you pray for?

This was the week when we saw the British Olympic teams honoured by the government in London, with a procession and open topped vehicles and crowds lining the way and lots and lots of cheering. This week we saw Andy Murray win the U.S. Open tennis, and if we wanted to, we could watch him being cheered by the crowd on the night, taken to speak to chat-show hosts, fêted by the media and made a main item of national news. Glory. These people were being given glory. It was no more than they deserved, but, like all worldly glory, it won't last. Winning one tournament won't guarantee Murray wins another - though I expect that we all hope he does. Success at one Olympics is not long remembered in the years before the next one.

Last week we heard the prayer of James and John, asking to sit beside Jesus in his glory. They had a lot to learn about how to pray and what to pray for. Today we see Jesus acclaimed by the crowds. I am sure that this would have been the sort of glorious reception that James and John had in mind when they asked for the share of Jesus' honour. This was the sort of recognition that they wanted their Master to be given and wanted to be part of. But like all worldly glory it wouldn't last.

The people shouted what they expected of Israel's Messiah. *Hosanna!* God saves. *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.* They were waiting for the Kingdom of David to be restored, they expected national autonomy and the restoration of the ancient united kingdom of David, a kingdom which had been united under only three kings, a restoration of a once-upon-a-time almost legendary golden age of Israel. That was why they cheered. That was what was in their minds: their cheers told the story. This was how they prayed, what they prayed for.

On Monday, when I heard members of the London crowd interviewed on radio, they all sounded really excited, elated, breathless with exuberance. That's the crowd effect. It's well known that a crowd can generate its own emotion of joy or sorrow. So it was with this crowd. No doubt James and John and the other disciples would be caught up in the excitement. But not Jesus. He may have enjoyed the moment, but he understood it far better than anyone else did, and he did not lose sight of his purpose and his goal. So when they entered the city, he looked around at the temple and then quietly slipped away - when no doubt the taverns and drinking houses were still echoing to muted cheering and revolutionary talk.

And then next day he came back. He came back and he went to break the expectation of the people. He went, not to the palace of Pilate, nor to where the Roman soldiers were garrisoned,

but to the temple. He went to the one place which God's servant, Israel's Messiah might be expected to think of as special. And he turned it upside down. Not all of it, not the parts where worship was still able to go on, but the other part. No one would have allowed buying and selling in the inner part of the temple where the Jewish priestly worship took place. No, it would be allowed in the outer court through which the Jews passed, probably without noticing it: the buying and selling would be in the court of the Gentiles.

Now you see the pertinence of the quotations Jesus uses. He runs together two thoughts, one from Isaiah 56 and the other from Jeremiah 7 to make the point that the temple is a house of prayer where all can come, but that it has been made like a den of thieves. His point is that the temple, if it is to be a house of prayer at all, is to be a house of prayer for all nations. When Jesus entered Jerusalem and the crowd gave him glory, they were rehearsing what they expected of Israel's Messiah. But Jesus did not come to be Israel's Messiah. He came to be the Saviour of the world.

By cleansing the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus was doing more than one thing. He was protesting about unfair trade - for the items sold within the temple could only be bought with special temple money, which was exchanged at what could be a ruinous rate. Protest about unfair trade is still a concern of Jesus' followers. If you want to know more about this, or raise awareness, check out what Christian Aid has to say; you could even go to Inshes Retail car park on the evening of October 4th, and visit the tax justice bus which will be there.

Jesus was also making space for non Jews to worship in Jerusalem. It was important to him that he be seen to be on the side of the Gentiles, because the other thing that he was trying to do was to get his own people to lift their eyes. They thought that God was the God of one part of the world, one people above all. But what sort of a God would that be? How small would God be if he were only concerned with one people group? Jesus wanted to get the Jews to lift up their eyes and see the bigness of God, the expansiveness, not exclusiveness of his love.

The people thought that Jesus would go after the Romans, the oppressors. But Jesus went after the temple, and by doing that he was saying that in his eyes it had also become a symbol and bastion of oppression - the oppression of all non-Jews.

We have grown up in a church and with a gospel which we know is for all nations. We love to welcome guests from all around the world. But who do we exclude and how? Of course we don't exclude anyone, as in turning them away at the door, but do we do it by less obvious means? The poor? Many people think that the church is for the middle classes. The busy? We demand that if you would worship you come at just one set time. The young? We are glad when young people come, but are we really set up to be a place where they feel at home?

There is more than one way, and more than one time in which we can worship God. That is why at the end of the month we will be embarking on Messy church on the last Sunday of each month, in the afternoon - indeed at tea time. Sometimes we need to show people that there are other ways to worship, and that we are willing to help them. One of the things we hope we might learn through twinning with another congregation - possibly in the Czech Republic - is what ways they enjoy worship which are different from ours. Do you pray about these things?

A house of prayer for all nations and all people; to be people who help others, to whom it is not natural, to find the way to come to God in praise and worship; that is the aim for God's people.

Part 2 v: 12-14, 20-33

Mark follows up the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem with the very odd story of the cursing of the fig tree. It was not the season for figs and so no figs were there and yet Jesus cursed the tree. There are all sorts of ways you can interpret this action, from hasty temper to an enacted parable of what God would do to Israel because of their lack of fruitfulness. When I read it, though, I am reminded of C.S. Lewis' words about Aslan the lion, who, in his books, is the Christ figure. Over and again we are told that "He is not a tame lion." Aslan is not a tame lion and Jesus is not a tame Messiah. The people had given a very good indication, by the words of their cheering, of what they hoped and expected that Jesus would do. But he is his own man and instead he does the inexplicable, and that on his way to do to what many would find inexcusable.

We can puzzle over the story of the fig tree for a long time, if we want, but what above all it should teach us, is that we need to keep our eyes on Jesus. As soon as we think that we know what Jesus would do, we need to look again, just to make sure. It is a warning to us not to let our expectations of Jesus colour what we see.

Jesus himself uses the fig tree to teach a lesson about faith and prayer. When you pray, I wonder what you pray about, what you ask for? Do you ask only for things that you think might happen anyway? Or do you tell God what is really in your heart, what you long to see? We often talk among ourselves about how sad it is that so few people see the relevance of the Gospel of God's love in their lives. Do you pray to God about that? Do you ask that God help your neighbours to see it? If God were to hear and answer such a prayer, things would change, in the community and in your life. Sometimes we find it better to put up with things the way they are, with a vague sadness that they are not different, rather than to pray about them, when things might change. Think about what you pray for, who you pray for, what you long for, and ask yourself if you really believe what Jesus said about having faith in God.

When Jesus said this, he was on his way to Jerusalem to what would inevitably, after what he had done the day before, be a day of confrontation. Next week we will see him taking on all sorts of expectations about authority. What we read today was the warm-up act for that. A warm-up act sets the tone for a show. If you go to see a famous comic, the warm-up act will be (supposedly) funny. If you go to hear a band, the warm-up will be music in a similar style. Jesus sets the tone of his future discussion here in standing up to the authority of the chief priests, scribes and elders. These were people who expected that when they asked a question, people would answer it. But Jesus does not. Instead he asks a question in his turn. He is showing that he holds his own authority to be just as great as that of his questioners.

Jesus did not, in the end - and we are getting near the end now - hold himself accountable to earthly authority, even when it was religious. And yet he was no anarchist. We have heard him and seen him uphold the Law, indeed we have seen that he thinks more widely than the letter of the law, so that rather than doing the bare minimum required, he will also think of what is best and helpful to the lowest and the least. In his cleansing of the temple he was thinking beyond the temple to those who were being excluded. His prayers were big and their answer would be costly.

Jesus' question to the Scribes went unanswered, and what was to happen was that he would be called upon to live out his own words, and forgive. His words on prayer with forgiveness point us towards the cross, where Jesus would forgive those who crucified him. But he could not have done this if such forgiveness was not already a pattern of life for him.

How do you pray and for what? Do you pray with faith and forgiveness? That sort of praying was what made Jesus who he was. That sort of praying is what Jesus still does as he intercedes for us. That sort of praying should be the hallmark of every follower of Jesus, keeping our lives, responses and focus in his perspective, making us worthy to follow him.

Amen