

Holy Week Tuesday

Matthew 21: 18 - 27

Just over a week ago, Pope Francis spoke in St Peter's Square in Rome. It was raining. The square of course was empty, but he spoke to the whole world. In his address he said 'It is a time to separate what is necessary from what is not....'

'It is a time to separate what is necessary from what is not'. These are such apt words from the Pope in these Covid19 times, - but they also fit with what Holy Week is about. As the events move inexorably towards Good Friday, Jesus is focussed on what is really important – what is necessary. Everything is converging to a final point. A focal point. 'Point' can mean a place, or a destination, but we also use it to mean the reason for something. 'Get to the point', we say, or 'what's the point?' the point of an action, the point of a life. It's a way of saying what is at the heart of the matter. St Nicholas Church in Durham for years had a display at the back with the title 'What's the point of a church like this?' So in Holy Week, the destination point is the cross on Good Friday, but the point – the heart - of the week leading up to it, what is that?

These events recounted in Matthew help us to understand.

Like James yesterday, I have done a bit of preparation for this evening. First reading of these strange bits of story in Matthew – a fig tree, some advice on prayer and a clever argument - did not give me instant inspiration about what to say! But it seems that Matthew has not tipped a random selection of stories and sayings into his gospel, like an optimistic cook creating a one pot meal. He has carefully thought about *how* he tells the story of Jesus. And, like good story tellers everywhere, he creates suspense towards the end. He chooses to do this by describing Jesus' final approach to Jerusalem, and what happens when he gets there. The other gospels make it clear that Jesus had of course visited Jerusalem before, but Matthew chooses not to mention those visits, but saves all the dramatic effect for this final and definitive journey, the culmination of a life. So every incident he chooses to put in on the way to Good Friday is significant, it's there for a reason, it conveys something really important - something necessary.

James described last night how powerfully Jesus was challenging the religious assumptions of the time. He was heralding change. 'The church is changing'. So far, then, we have had

- arriving on the donkey – but powerful leaders don't ride donkeys. It's like Prince Charles turning up in a white van. **Oh yes they do**, says Matthew – don't you remember the OT prophet's words: 'your king is coming to you humble and mounted on a donkey'.
Jesus challenges what it means to be powerful.
- throwing over the money lenders and merchants' tables in the temple – but you can't seriously worship God without meaningful rituals, sacrifices and proper regulations. Everyone knows that. **Oh yes you can**, says Matthew – remember the OT words: the temple is meant to be 'a house of prayer'.
Jesus challenges what it means to worship properly
- Then in a little, easily missed verse, we hear that he healed the blind and the lame *in the temple* and children *in the temple* called him 'the son of David' – but you can't have God's holy place spoiled by anything impure and imperfect, like blind, lame or children. **Oh yes you can**, says Matthew – remember the OT words: praise comes 'out of the mouths of infants'. Jesus heals *inside* the temple.
Jesus challenges the view that some people aren't allowed into God's healing presence.
- now this evening, we have the story of cursing the fig tree. This reads to us like the petty action of someone who is irritable because they haven't had their breakfast . . . but it obviously isn't. So what is it there for? It must be a lived parable, a symbolic action of some kind, done to make a point. What's the point? Fig trees were common, useful for shade (remember Jesus telling Nathaniel he'd seen him under the fig tree? They think Nathaniel may have been studying the scriptures in the shade) – and fig trees produce flowers and leaves and fruit at same time, and can produce two sets of fruit in a year. This tree looks healthy,

with plenty of leaves, it's flourishing, it's fine. You can't argue with that. **Oh yes you can**, says Matthew – it has no fruit. And at Jesus' presence it withers.

Jesus challenges the seemingly healthy and flourishing religious assumptions and structures. For without 'fruit' they have no 'point' and cannot survive.

- Next, Jesus seems to say that if they can summon up enough faith the disciples too can work showy and apparently impossible miracles. . . but that doesn't sound much like Jesus either. And anyway, why include it in these final, tension-building, necessary events? Apparently 'moving mountains' was then as it is now a familiar proverbial way of saying 'what seems impossible'. So this seems to be about reminding us that the impossible is God's business. We can't have enough faith to cope with these kinds of challenges and changes. **Oh yes you can**, says Matthew – this is not about us looking for magic taps to fill our faith bucket fuller and fuller. Faith is about our relationship with the Father, our trust.

Jesus challenges us to look to God to do the seemingly impossible, in times of change, whether the change is enormous or tiny.

- and finally in today's reading, a clever argument in the temple with the chief priests and elders where Jesus outsmarts them. It was a well known public debating device – ask a question, parry with a counter question until one side has proved their point. So what is the point? They are testing him out on 'authority', identity, an insistent and recurring theme of the gospels . . . 'who is this?' was asked as he entered on the donkey; 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Pilate later asked; Jesus doesn't seem to answer. There *is* no straight answer to the question – **Oh yes there is**, says Matthew. Just look at what he says and does – there is God, just what you least expect him to be. Later when Jesus is dead on the cross, it is the centurion who says 'Truly this man was God's son'.

Jesus challenges them – and us – to see him for who he is.

So – what is the point of this week? Can we accept Jesus' challenges, each in our own way?

What does it mean to be powerful – in humility?

What does it mean to worship properly – in prayer?

Can we welcome *everyone* into God's healing presence?

Can we look for fruitfulness and not just appearances in our churches – in our lives?

Can we look to God to do the seemingly impossible?

Can we see God in the least expected places? Can we see Jesus for who he is?

The church is changing? Can the church change? Can we separate what is necessary from what is not? It's too difficult - we can't do this.

Oh yes we can.

Amen