

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Monday of Holy Week 2020

The sheer number of events and teachings which the Gospels record as taking place in Holy Week is breathtaking. Jesus and his disciples are constantly on the move, being jostled in the city, repeatedly questioned by the authorities as the noose of opposition gradually tightens around him.

Over time, the churches have come to focus on different aspects of the events of Holy Week on different days. Some traditions refer to them by name, as shorthand for the event that is particularly commemorated on that day: Fig Monday (the story of the withering of the fig tree), Temple Tuesday (the so-called cleansing of the temple, when Jesus drove out those who were buying and selling and overturned the tables of the money-changers) and Spy Wednesday (when Judas offered to betray Jesus to the authorities). In our daily reflections for the first part of this week we focus on these three events.

The withering of the fig tree occurs in the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark. In Matthew's account it is described in these terms:

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' and the fig tree withered at once.'

Matthew 21.18-19

In Mark's account the event is split into two: the command that no one eat fruit from the tree again occurs on one day, and the discovery that the tree has withered is made on the following morning. They are separated by the cleansing of the temple. In the Scriptures the fig tree is often used as a symbol of Israel. When it withers it means that judgment is imminent, often because of corruption that has affected the worship and system of the temple. It was, in some senses, punishment for hypocrisy. The first hearers of the Gospel would have had no difficulty linking the fate of the fig tree with Jesus's actions in the temple.

The withering of the fig tree puts a similar challenge to us as Christians. Do we simply go through the motions of our faith, without it having an impact on the way we treat others, ourselves and the creation around us? Or does our faith bear fruit in our lives?

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ... Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. *Matthew 7.15-20*

Jesus said that those who remained in him would bear much fruit (*John 15.4-6*).

And the apostle Paul refers to the fruit of the Spirit in these terms:

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. *Galatians 5.22-23*

One of the things which those of us not working on the front line of the coronavirus crisis have at present is time to reflect. We might use Fig Monday to ask ourselves some questions:

What will our fruits be as a result of this time?

Will we emerge more compassionate, more aware of our interdependence?

Will we be more grateful for whatever good health we enjoy?

Will we become more appreciative of those who work each day, often for minimal wages, to ensure our safety and food supply?

Will we become more respectful of the natural world? Will we be less profligate with its resources?

Will we show forth the fruits of the Spirit?

And what of our faith? Will it emerge stronger, deeper, through this time of testing? On what will we set our hope?

Let us set our hope on the one who suffered, died and rose for us. And let us try to be fruitful, for his sake.