THE BARREN FIG TREE (Mk. 11:12-21)

Mk. 11:12 And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: **13** And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. **14** And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it. **15** And they come to Jerusalem: and Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves; **16** And would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple. **17** And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves. **18** And the scribes and chief priests heard it, and sought how they might destroy him: for they feared him, because all the people was astonished at his doctrine. **19** And when even was come, he went out of the city. **20** And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. **21** And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.

Mk. 11:12 And on the morrow … This is the Tuesday, the 11th of Nisan, - the day after Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, and three days before He would be crucified. He has come from Bethany, the crowds have welcomed Him. He has made His way up to the temple, entered it, didn't like what He saw, and left. He had been there before, of course, on many occasions … Three years previously He saw the same scene as just now, and He caused quite a stir, **Jn. 2:15** And when he had made a scourge *[φραγέλλιον, whip]* of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; **16** And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.

Now that we are in Mk. 11 He is returning with His disciples on the Tuesday morning, and **12** he was hungry. That is a very 'ordinary' statement, and yet when it is applied to Jesus Who is God, here we are also shown His humanity, he was hungry. Most likely, He had been staying with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus … and Martha 'liked her kitchen' (**Lk. 10:39** she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. **40** But Martha was cumbered about much serving) … I'm sure she would have wanted Jesus to have had a good breakfast, but He must have been in a hurry to begin His work that day, and so he was hungry.

. … As he was leaving Bethany, He saw a fig tree a distance away. It had plenty of leaves, but it did not have any fruit/figs … so, **14** Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it. … Strange … but Jesus proceeded to enter the temple, from where He cast out the moneychangers. And then, since it was evening, He left the old city because the chief priests and the scribes were looking to abduct and kill Him. … On their way back to Bethany Jesus and His disciples passed the withered fig tree, **21** And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away. …

Jesus was using the withered fig tree as an analogy to illustrate how the temple would be destroyed. The temple was the very heart of the Jewish religion, the 'head-quarters' of Judaism. The temple signified the religion … The people saw their temple as being indestructible, and that is how they saw their religion. They saw their temple as being irreplaceable, and that is how they saw their position within their religion. Over the years, their religion had been *choreographed* to suit their ambitions and how they had come to believe … but as far as Jesus was concerned, their religion was rotten to the core!

The worship emanating from the temple was corrupt and, therefore, He judged the whole nation as corrupt. … The site where the temple was situated had been holy unto the Lord for it was the place, - about eighteen hundred years earlier, - Abraham had offered the sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22). It is also where King David purchased that specific piece of land upon which the temple of Solomon would be built. That is Jewish land, where the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque presently occupies today … It wasn't stolen, - it was bought and paid for! … It had belonged to a Jebusite called Ornan/Araunah, a Canaanite who built and inhabited Jerusalem, and he sold it to David, **I Chron. 21:21** And as David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out of the threshingfloor, and bowed himself to David with his face to the ground. **22** Then David said to Ornan, Grant me the place of this threshingfloor, that I may build an altar therein unto the LORD: thou shalt grant it me for the full price: that the plague may be stayed from the people. **23** And Ornan said unto David, Take it to thee, and let my lord the king do that which is good in his eyes: lo, I give thee the oxen also for burnt offerings, and the threshing instruments for wood, and the wheat for the meat offering; I give it all. **24** And king David said to Ornan, Nay; but I will verily buy it for the full price: for I will not take that which is thine for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings without cost. **25** So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight.

And the temple of Solomon, - built on that ground, - was built to the specifications given to him by God, and it was the residence of God on earth as He entered it and dwelt there among His people. However, the Jews began to take their privileged relationship with Him for granted and they drew in foreign idol worship. Obviously, this incurred God's wrath and He brought the Babylonians to destroy the temple and occupy the city. … God was not willing to allow His building to be used for false worship, so He had it destroyed … and nobody used it! … It is sad to see churches turned into restaurants, bars, discos, and all kinds of things. … I wonder if God is doing now what He did

away back then when He judged the unfaithfulness of His people and He closed down the temple in 586 BC, and also since 70 AD.

And when Jesus looked at the fig tree He could see where the Jewish religion was heading, - *spiritual destruction*! Israel was apostate for they had forsaken the God of their fathers. They would have denied that, of course. As far as they were concerned, they were Jews to the core … but not from where Jesus was standing! Their religion was corrupt, their leaders were corrupt, and the people were corrupt. … That was how the Saviour judged.

This was Passover when Jesus condemned this fig tree. With the fig tree, the fruit comes first, and then the leaves. The fruit starts to appear during this Passover month of Nisan (March/April). … The fruit would have been small, it would not yet have had its full taste, but it was edible … especially if you were hungry! Later in the spring-time its fruit would improve, as would its leaves … but there was nothing but leaves on this tree. It was obviously not going to bear fruit. … And the picture it illustrates is Jesus had a right to hope for fruit, but there was none. … And since there was no fruit, - nothing but leaves, - the fig tree was not serving its purpose, so He declared a curse on it and it died (note v.21). … Previously it had the appearance it might produce fruit, but it was a false appearance.

It was exactly like what was happening in the temple, - it was ‘for show’. It had no spiritual substance, - it was all ‘leaf and no fruit’ … and Jesus put a curse on it … the upshot of which was the temple would be destroyed forty years later by the Romans. But it wasn’t just the temple, - the bricks and mortar, - it was also what the temple represented for it was the whole nation that was about to incur God’s judgment. The people had carelessly reckoned on a form of religion suitable to their selfish requirements, and they abandoned the true worship of God. It is like how the saying goes, “In the beginning God created the world, and since then the world has been recreating God”.

Religion had become a commercial enterprise. It was a money-making exercise. Its chief priests and authorities were endorsed by the corrupt Jewish leaders. There was open ‘nepotism’, - the religious leadership was a family affair, - Annas had been the high priest, then he kept it in the family by handing it over to his son-in-law Caiaphas (Jn. 18:13) … These were ungodly men who were the guardians of Judaism … but Jesus ‘saw right through

them'! … These were the religious pretenders and deceivers of His day. And these were the people Jesus confronted in the temple.

It is interesting to notice how He judged this nation. He didn't judge them by their politics, i.e. how they managed to live so comfortably with the Roman invaders. He didn't judge them by their economics, - by how strongly the shekel compared with other currencies. Neither did He judge the nation by their housing policy, or their social policy, or their foreign policy … Instead, He judged the nation by the state of their worship of God. King Solomon correctly affirmed, **Prov. 14:34** Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people. And, as Peter wrote, **I Peter 4:17** judgment must begin at the house of God … And that is where Jesus began, at the house of God, in the temple.

You cannot help but compare how all this relates to Christianity in the United Kingdom. Coming closer to home, we look at the churches in Scotland … What kind of a 'Christianity' is being propagated and promoted by those in authority? … If Jesus was to come to this nation today, would he see any difference in what He saw in the temple of Jerusalem?!

And so, He went into the heart of the nation of Israel … into the temple, and He judged all those fiddling and conniving money-changers. He saw how they made the people pay the half-shekel tax to get into the temple … and if they had left it too late to buy their sacrificial Passover lamb, the price would have 'rocketed' to a ridiculous and exorbitant figure … I wonder if they had a tea-room, with fancy gifts at similarly inflated prices?! … And Jesus looked up and down the rows of merchandise they were selling, - in the name of their religion, - and He was disgusted … How could you worship in such a place!

Surely, the only thing you could do is to get out! … But before Jesus got out, He had something very important to do. He was so disgusted you could see the anger in His face. He went to those tables, - full of all their religious 'knick-knacks', - and He tossed the whole lot into the air! … The merchants 'dived for cover'! The moneychangers scarpered. The 'dove-sellers' were in a whole flurry as their birds escaped out of the cages … and all those carrying anything unclean through the temple dropped it! … There was utter panic! … Hypocrites, - the whole lot of them, - and Jesus let them know it! … And the ordinary people watched on, *astonished*.

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" … He is also the all-powerful, omnipotent God, and He has a zero-tolerance for sin, and especially when it comes in the guise of religion, and especially when it comes into His house! … **Gal. 6:7** God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. … And we could also legitimately change the words a little, for whatsoever a *[nation]* soweth, that shall *[the nation]* also reap. False religion has serious consequences for a nation … when religious men fraternise and support laws and decrees propagated by enemies of the Gospel, those who are vehemently opposed to God. … They are heaping upon themselves His wrath!

And so, it was just about everything was happening in this temple which should not have been happening … but there was neither sight nor sound of anything that had been instituted by God, - it had all been compromised, and whittled away! There was no Gospel being preached … nothing about looking for the Messiah. Holiness was a foreign concept. The Son of God was an 'outsider', and a stranger to 'the religious elite' … He came unto His own in the temple, and there wasn't one of them would have anything to do with Him! **Ps. 69:8** I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children. **9** For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. … Those were serious times which could *not* have avoided the wrath of the Saviour! … What would He think of such places today?!

And when Jesus started to toss over the tables, - with all the religious ornaments and the like, - there was none to stand against Him! They didn't like what He was doing, but when He started none could stop Him! One Man, - Jesus, - against them all, as He demonstrated the righteous and holy wrath of God. … He caused absolute panic and chaos in the temple … Remember the fig tree being cursed, … this was the temple being cursed! … This was the start of what would be completed at the hands of the Roman General Titus and his armies in 70 AD … This is where it started … This was the zeal of the Lord Jesus for the House of His Father, **Mk. 11:17** And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, *My* house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves. … The ungodly had come into His house and desecrated, defiled, perverted, profaned, and dishonoured it. It was so badly contaminated by false religion, - irreparable, beyond hope, - that God did not want it back, and that is why He used the Romans to destroy it.

When the scribes and chief priests heard what was happening, **18** *[they]* sought how they might destroy him *[Jesus]*: for they feared Him, - their hatred of Him

intensified. They would not 'face up' to Him though, instead, they plotted 'behind His back'. They were more determined than ever, because all the people *[the ordinary people who had come to worship]* was astonished *[utterly amazed]* at his doctrine *[by His teaching]*. …

That evening, - the Tuesday evening, - **19** And when even was come, he went out of the city. He would have returned to Bethany, - He had somewhere to stay, and it was sufficiently out of the reach of the Jewish authorities to be relatively safe. The next morning, - Wednesday morning, - **20** And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. … *Dead!* And that was the spiritual scene in Jerusalem. **21** And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master *[rabbi]*, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away. …

What lessons are being taught here? We are being taught that God is jealous for His Name, - He is not willing to share His glory with any other, and that is what He said from the beginning, **Ex. 34:14** For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. … *That* temple was *His* temple, - it was built for His glory, but that was not how it was being used, and He was not prepared to 'let it out' to any other. Either *He* would be worshipped there, or there would be no temple at all! … I believe that is a principle we need to take account of today. If we were to change and replace the Gospel, and if we were to contradict and undermine what the Bible says … we would have no right to be here, and we would have no right to be called a church. A church loses its right to be called a church if it is not the temple of the Holy Spirit. If it is not preaching the Word of God, then the sounds it makes are like 'vain jangling' (I Tim. 1:6) … That is how it was in the church in Sardis, **Rev. 3:1** I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. You look the part, and you sound the part, but spiritually there is nothing there … for *you're dead ... you are a spiritual corpse!* … Imagine the *noise* in the temple. There was no holy contemplation, in preparation of meeting with God, - it was all a rabble … People looking out for their own selfish interests!

Another important lesson is that there is an enemy trying desperately to infiltrate the 'temple of the Holy Spirit' … and that enemy is interested in harming every aspect of God's work. For example, in the epistles, the churches are warned time and again to beware … Jude recorded, **4** there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness *[unbridled lust for their own desires]*, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. They come

in with their false teachings, with the intention of undoing everything good. … John spoke about a certain Diotrephes, **III Jn. 1:9** who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not … And Paul described how Hymenaeus and Philetus were like a 'canker' (gangrene, II Tim. 2:17), and had sneaked their way into the assemblies with their false teachings, **II Tim. 2:18** and overthrow the faith of some. … And there was Demas who lost his first love (II Tim. 4:10), and the young man in Corinth who was far too close to his mother (I Cor. 5:1) … And all these things, - when they are not dealt with, - they undermine 'the temple of God' … And that is why we need to take heed of how Paul cautioned Timothy, **I Tim. 6:20** O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: **21** Which some professing have erred concerning the faith … **II Tim. 4:2** Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. **3** For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.

But here is the encouragement … God knows those who are His and He will reward their faithfulness. He will honour the faithful old Simeon's and the faithful old Anna's, regardless of the apparent demise of true Godly religion. It does not matter the size of the fellowship, or the age … but what *does* matter is the authenticity of their allegiance to the Lord. … That is how the Lord spoke concerning the church which met at Smyrna, **Rev. 2:9** I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) ... **10** … be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

The 'fig tree' in Smyrna was growing healthily, even though it had mighty winds of persecution about to blow against it … When the children of Israel were captive in Babylon almost six hundred years earlier, they *knew*, **Lam. 3:22** It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. **23** They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. **24** The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. **25** The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. **26** It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

While we can see *much* the church today has in common with the Israel in Jesus' time, Scripture also gives us great hope. Micah prophesied about the temple and the fig tree, **Micah 4:1** But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. **2** And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and

to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. **3** And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. **4** But **they shall sit every man under his vine and under <u>his fig tree</u>** … The fig trees will be growing again! … **7** … and the LORD shall reign over *[His people]* in mount Zion from henceforth, even for ever.

That is how it will be because that is the Lord's promise! ... The days we are looking ahead to do not depend on a new American President, or a UK Prime Minister's plans to get us out of the EU … We are trusting in the promises of God! … May we never doubt His Word, but remain steadfast as we stand faithful to His most precious Name! Amen.