

Enigmatic Jesus?

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[0 : 00] Okay, so we're going to turn back for a little while to that. Quite a difficult passage today, it has to be said. Wouldn't it be one that I would naturally have chosen for a baptism?

But I think we're going through this and it does ultimately very strongly point to the reality of the symbolism of baptism, which is great.

Now, I think us Scots are often reputed for being cynical about other Scots who become famous, rich or successful.

And we're reputed to be people who knock them down. We don't like someone who becomes famous and rich and successful in our context. Allegedly, anyway, that's what they say about us sometimes.

And they do say that what we say is that we knew your father. And so it's a kind of thing where, you know, we know where you come from, so don't get too high and mighty in your fame and in your wealth because you're really just one of us.

[1 : 01] And whether that's true or not, I actually think it's probably not true. And if it is true, it's broader than just Scots. I think probably there's an innate envy and jealousy sometimes in the human heart.

But we do see it that way and we see it as common in media circles, maybe particularly to hear about someone famous or wealthy or rich or a good worker who has fallen, whose guard has slipped, good people being caught out.

And none better than ministers, of course. That's always the best people to catch out and to find a fault or an Achilles' heel in their lives. Now, I guess for many cynics of Jesus, I'm not sure if there'll be any here today who are very cynical of Jesus.

And if you are, then, well, I'm really glad you're here anyway, of course, to hear about the message of the gospel. But even as Christians, we can look at a passage like this.

But for a cynic especially, and they may look at this passage and think this passage appears very sweet indeed, because it exposes, it finally exposes Jesus.

[2 : 10] We see Him in a different light, don't we, in this passage. He's angry. You know what it is? When you're hungry, you get angry if you can't get food. And Jesus appears to be angry, and He takes out His hunger on this poor little fig tree, which He hopes to get some fruit from and doesn't.

And He just judges it and curses it and shows a kind of vindictive spirit. And then He goes into the temple after that. And it seems to be that He loses His temper, His cool, His control as He goes round up, turning all the tables.

Ah, so Jesus is really just like us all after all. Or if He is God, then He's revealed Himself as a bad temper deity, and it gives us an excuse not to trust in Him.

Finally being exposed, Jesus in this passage. It's a difficult passage. And that's a very serious charge. I hope if you make that charge, you don't make it lightly, and I hope you're willing to think through that charge.

This passage does require a little bit of work, but I want you to be willing to come to it and allow God to speak beyond the surface for all of us.

[3 : 28] Because I think in the initial reading, we all find this passage quite difficult in many ways. But please remember the context. We've been looking at this section for a while, and we're now coming towards the Passion Week, the last week of Jesus.

He's moving towards... He's in at the edges of Jerusalem. He's gone in and out of Jerusalem, and He knows that by the end of the week, He will be crucified. And He's predicted that.

He's spoken about that. So there's real tension in the air, and it's a really focused time for Him. But it's really vital for us to think about what Jesus...

I'm going to say some radical things here about this passage. Well, but firstly, can we notice a very important weverse that we didn't read? So we read from verse 12.

But Corey last week read the passage, the triumph entry and preached on that. But the last verse there, verse 11, tells us that He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple.

[4 : 29] And when He had looked around at everything, as it was already, He went out to Bethany with the twelve. So He'd already scoped out the temple the night before.

So bear that in mind. He knew exactly what was happening in the temple. This daily ritual of buying and selling, He would have seen the day before.

He knew. It was late. So He went home, or He went to where He was staying. And then He knew that He had an important symbolic statement to make in the temple the next day.

He saw everything that He was going on. He didn't miss anything. He'd been in the temple and He was going to go back to the temple. Now the temple in Jesus' day was the center for religious, but also for social and economic life of the Jewish people.

It's a hugely significant and important building and all that it symbolized. And it was very much at this time, it was their security blanket, if we can call it that.

[5 : 32] See, as long as they had the temple and what they believed they had God's presence in the temple, in a sense they abused it and they reckoned they could live any way they like as long as they could just come back to the temple and find peace with God behind its walls.

So they thought. It allowed them to do things because they thought they were the privileged people of God, that God was with them, that they could take God's word. They even took it in the religious leaders and they turned it upside down.

And they abused what the temple was meant to signify, that place of humility and sacrificial, of sacrifices for sin and humble living and prayer.

And they used it to exploit people. They exploited the sacrificial system itself, abusing it and exploiting the poor and eager to keep the religious and the political power to themselves.

I mean, the verse in verse 17, where Jesus says, you've made my house a den of robbers, that comes from Jeremiah chapter 7.

[6 : 42] It's really worth going back and reading that because that really explains what God was thinking about the way they were abusing the temple at the time. They were basically living any old way they wanted.

They were idolatrous, they were impure, they were... There was all kinds of things going on. And yet they said, the temple, the temple, the temple they cried out as if it would save them and as if they would be safe there because of what it stood for.

And Jesus exposes that and said, you've made it a den of robbers. The very system that God had put in place that was meant to speak of God's holiness and expose their need of a Savior through the shedding of blood, that they were meant to come to humbly and prayerfully thinking forward to the Savior, the Messiah that God would send.

It became something that they abused. It became a commercial venture, a power game. Ultimately, it became a place, a symbol of their independence from God in God's name, in His living room as it were.

They were kind of sticking two fingers up at God in His own home. And that was brutal.

[8 : 05] And we need to remember that as we come to this section. Now, can we look just briefly at the structure of this section because what we've done in the past with Mark, we've seen that everything he does, everything he writes is very carefully measured and thought out and placed in the right way in order to get through a message.

So what we have here is we have Jesus in the morning. He must have said to his disciples because they recognize and they say at them, or Mark records it, that Jesus said he was hungry. And so he goes to, as he's walking into Jerusalem, he sees a fig tree and there's no figs in it.

It's not the season for figs. We'll come back to that a little bit. But he pronounces judgment on this fruitless fig tree. And then he goes into the temple and he sees, he knows what's happening in the temple and he turns all the tables upside down and he runs the money changers out and he begins to teach the people who are there.

And in the Mark, in the Matthew account, we're told that he heals people as well at that time. Then when he comes back out and there's this kind of kiffal with the religious leaders who want him dead by this point, he goes out and as they're passing by, they see the fig tree is withered in Peter.

He says, what's that fig tree that you cursed? It's dead from the roots. It's absolutely gone. And he then goes on to explain that from that picture about prayer and faith, which doesn't seem terribly connected, goes on to say, well, you know, you should live by faith.

[9 : 46] If you can tell this mountain to move, it will go into the heart of the sea. And then we have the Pharisees questioning by what authority he was doing these things. I'm not going to spend any time really on that except just at the very end.

So what does this structure of it mean? What does it mean for us? Well, I'm going to say something that you might not have expected at this point in the sermon, which is that what happens in this account and the acts of Jesus with the fig tree and in the temple are symbolic acts which reveal, what do you think it reveals?

It reveals unparalleled love. Okay? Now, you might not immediately think, well, wait a minute, that doesn't seem to connect.

I hope you'll see that it does. Really? It's significant. This passage is significant for every human being who ever walked on this earth, including everyone here.

Really? Surely not. This bizarre kind of side story in the gospels. I don't know any relation to my life as I go out to work tomorrow.

[10 : 56] Well, hopefully we'll see. Jesus, you see, he comes to this fig tree, having told his disciples he's hungry, and he comes to a fig tree that he knows is out of season.

He knows it's not going to bear any fruit. He knows it's impossible that the fig tree at that time of year will bring him any fruit whatsoever. You know, we saw last week that he knew about the colt that was unwritten that he was going to have to ride on into...

He knew these things. Christ was not stupid when it came to this reality. He wasn't found out.

He didn't look at that fig tree. Oh, you're a wretched fig tree. You're not bearing any fruit. He knew absolutely that he wouldn't bear any fruit. He wasn't blindsided.

But he made sure that the disciples heard this word of judgment on the fig tree, because there are really important sentences that he says. And then the next morning, they see the result of that judgment on the fig tree.

[12 : 02] Unbelievable. But in the middle of this fig tree sandwich, because of fig tree, and then there's the judgment on the fig tree that is seen by the disciples.

And the middle of that is the temple story. And that immediately, in the way Mark writes, is saying, look, there's significance in what Jesus did with the fig tree that relates to what he did in the temple. And that's very important. He goes to the temple and Mark wants us to see the significance of this temple story being sandwiched between the accounts of the fig tree, because the dead fig tree, the judgment on the fig tree is the same judgment that God was bringing on this man-centered, self-centered, empty religion that was being worked out in the temple.

Because the system by this stage was representing man's efforts, human beings' efforts to ignore to hoodwink and to distort God and His person and His love and His truth and His revelation of Himself that He had given in the Old Testament.

And He was pointing out that He was coming to destroy that. He was coming to bring the way back to God that the temple, even the temple as it was designed, could never do, but especially the temple as they abused it, could never do.

[13 : 36] It was God's dwelling place on earth, remember in the Holy of Holies, that place that they could only come to by sacrifice, but yet they were ignoring Him and they were abusing the whole system.

It could never be the answer to heal and to redeem and to give humanity hope and to break the judgment of death that every single living soul has ever faced.

So Christ comes in and you know, it doesn't say, you know, it often says, or we think that Jesus in anger up turns the table.

It doesn't say that, it never says that. There's just that sense in which He's doing something measured and something deliberate and something symbolic.

He turns over the tables, but He's not there to fine tune things. He's not there to tweak things and to reform things. He is there declaring with the authority of God Himself as God that there's a day of judgment coming.

[14 : 40] There's a day of death coming. And there's no human institution. There's no self-made redemption. There's no efforts that anyone can make to reach up to God that can work.

All these tables need to be turned upside down. And we need to destroy that way of thinking. We need to recognize that way of thinking only leads to death and separation from the living God. From its very roots, our efforts to reach God are damned to failure. And Jesus wants to get that message across. He wants to get that message across in this fig tree sandwich as He comes into the temple.

The temple by Jesus times a monument to human failure to get right with God by ironically ignoring God, even among the religious people.

Those who were the religious leaders who actually wanted Jesus dead because they thought they could get to God and please God by just doing outward moral and self-righteous acts.

[15 : 51] And, you know, we can be like that too. Let's not forget that. But by ignoring God, we're always separated under judgment, fruitless and spiritually dead.

That's the message that Jesus wants to get across as He speaks in this challenging and powerful way. It's a really big message. It's a really big message that actually He's saying that death is not the natural conclusion of life.

It's not just something that happens ordinarily. It's symptomatic of being separated from the author of life, God Himself, who gifts us life but from the moment we're born, we're... in His patience, He gives us life but we're dying and separated from Him without Jesus Christ.

It's unpopular, it's humbling, it's a stark message that Jesus brings. So where's the unparalleled love you're speaking about? It seems like a pretty judgmental message.

Well, it's not the end of the story. It's not the end of the story. Please stay with me just for a few more minutes and I hope that we can respond and worship because there's at least two symbolic realities unfold and Jesus is often using symbolism to get across His truth.

[17 : 20] So metaphorically, Jesus knows that He Himself is going to become the fig tree. Do you see that?

He pronounces this judgment of death, destruction, fruitlessness on the fig tree because He Himself is about to become, as it were, metaphorically, the fig tree in our place.

He's spoken about His crucifixion, death and resurrection and that's what's on His mind. He's about to take the sentence of death in inhumanity's place, the just judgment of God due to every person that death and eternal separation.

He's going to take because He loves us, loves us so much. Before we would even thought of our born, He was willing to do this. He's going to take our place.

That's how it's so deep, so costly, such an unfathomable love. I don't have the words for it. I can't even imagine that love and that's when being a preacher is a terrible thing because it's just so inadequate to get across, even to my own heart, the cost and the depth of a love of a living God who would be willing to take that judgment on Himself in our place, even though we had no time for Him.

[18 : 46] Christ says, I'll take your pain. I'm going to take your emptiness, your fear, your death. I'll pay the price. I'll bridge the gap. I can do it.

I love you. Trust me. Have faith in me. This is the greatest, the deepest, the widest, the highest expression of love that you'll ever know.

Now there'll be great expression of love shortly in a baptism. Love of parents, love of grandparents, love of aunties and uncles, family love, close love. There's love that's just swelling round this place today in many different ways.

None of it, all of it significant, all of it from God, but none of it as deep or as high or as costly as what Jesus has done for us. And what I've done, He says, should turn your world upside down.

That's part of the symbolism. To that greatest reunion that every living person is searching for in their hearts and lives and looking for in all kinds of different places, but not finding it in relationship with their Creator and their God and their Savior.

[19 : 59] Can only be found when we meet with God and Christ through what He's done. Fig tree. Okay. The fig tree.

This was anticipating. In some ways it speaks about us, the fig tree, but I think most significantly here it speaks about Christ anticipating the coming judgment of the Father willingly that He takes on Himself, the Son through the Spirit in our place.

So baptism speaks of beautiful, costly, sacrificial love. So metaphorically He becomes the fig tree, but also what He is saying is actually He becomes and He is the true temple.

So the temple was always just a temporary measure that was designed to point people towards the coming Savior. Speak of His holiness, the separation, the big curtain that separated everyone from the holy of holies, the priests coming in once a year with the atoning sacrifice representing the people, but the temple and the dwelling of God with His people was always meant to simply point towards Jesus Christ who Himself by being the sacrifice would open up the way from the holy of holies for all of us to access God.

So you know, you've got that. I mean, there's lots of symbolism, isn't there? And we're not great at symbolism in Scotland or in the West really. We don't think in these visual images quite so well as Eastern people.

[21 : 38] However, isn't that amazing picture, isn't it, of when Christ dies on the cross, this great big 80-foot curtain that separates the people from the holy of holies is ripped in two from top to bottom, symbolic of what Christ has achieved on the cross.

That permanent, free and full access in prayer and in relationship to the living, creating, saving and judging God that we all can enjoy because of what He has done and the spilling of His blood.

Because He is the true temple. He defeats evil and death on our behalf. And in His victory, we take up spiritual life and power, the resurrection power which we can share and trust with Him.

There's many references to Jesus being the temple and no more so in Ephesians chapter 2 and at verse 20 where He speaks about the church as being part of that as well.

He says, but you are fellow citizens and saints, members of the household of God built in the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, which people rejected, we know, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

[23 : 04] So God dwells in His people, we become the temple of God because Jesus is the head of that. Jesus is the cornerstone. All kinds of images being used to describe the life that we get, the hope that we get, the power that we have in Christ.

You see, the temple building couldn't do anything. Jesus, I think in a couple of chapters later on when He's in front of Pilate, they say about Jesus, oh Jesus, you know, He's a liar and a cheat. He said that the temple would be knocked down in three, it would be absolutely destroyed and in three days it would be built again. It took 64 years to build, but of course He was talking about Himself being the temple.

A building can't do anything for us. You know, if the temple, if the Jews are looking for a temple to be rebuilt on the holy site in Israel tomorrow, it's not going to do them any good because Jesus is the temple.

Jesus is the temple because it's a relationship we need, not a building. This church will not do any good. This building is going to go with all the other buildings. It's the person of Jesus and His power, His resurrection power that will make the difference in your life and mind because it takes us from death to life.

[24 : 25] And in Christ we're forgiven, rescued, and we're coming home. It's a great thing. It's a wonderful thing. We don't have any time to do any more, but just to finish with a couple of conclusions very quickly, because Jesus goes on to make that connection between the fig tree being dead and it being no use, and therefore the temple, and that way of trying to reach God being no use, and then He talks about prayer and faith, and faith that can move mountains.

We don't have time really to go into that except that it's this recognition that it is in a relationship with Christ through prayer that we begin to experience new life, resurrection life.

Have you ever thought, and you know, I think we think far, we speak a lot about the death of Jesus. I don't think we speak nearly enough about His resurrection, because without His resurrection His death would have wasted time. The resurrection reminds us that Jesus is the only living being whoever not only gave Himself over to death, death didn't take Him, He gave Himself over to death, He gave up His Spirit in order to take it up again on the third day, showing that He defeated sin and darkness and evil and death in His resurrection, and all who trust in Him will also know that defeat of death.

So yes, we may well die unless He comes first, but yet we will still live. We will go on not only to live with Him, but to know resurrection life bodily and physically in His return.

So prayer is that indication that we have come into a relationship with God. That's a mountain that's been moved. See what you prayed this morning?

[26 : 24] Supposing you could have thrown Arthur's seat into the sea, there wouldn't have been a greater miracle than you praying this morning. Ah, you could walk about and say, that would be great to be able to throw, what a face to throw Arthur's seat into the sea, why would you add in a white, you don't want to do that.

When you think that would be a great miracle, amazing miracle, I've never seen anyone that could do such a miracle. But when you said dear Jesus this morning in prayer, that was a far greater miracle.

And we take that for granted, and everything talking to God is just a waste of time, or it's just an empty kind of ritual that we're engaged in. There's no greater miracle than by faith praying to God because it shows that we are spiritually alive as we put our trust in Him.

And you couldn't bring yourself to spiritual life, and I couldn't make that relationship with God work. Only Christ can do that as we come to Him by faith. That's why prayer, and that's why prayer opens us up to remarkable life if we only grasp that and see what the fruit of the Spirit is in our lives.

No fruit, figless fig. We can be fruitful in Christ and we know what the fruit of God is to love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, making us self-control.

[27 : 38] These are the mountains. These are the impossible things. You need them in your workplace tomorrow. You think you're ordinary. You're the most miraculous thing that ever lived as a Christian, and for that we give God the glory.

And as part of that, as He says in verse 25, I think this is very important, forgiveness becomes our currency. I live in a bitter world, a sad, bitter, insensitive, careless, unforgiving world we do.

And we all sense that in our own hearts. And yet He says, you know, talking about prayer, He says, whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone so that your Father also in heaven may forgive you.

That's the currency of the cross. We can't swan about thinking that Jesus, we love Jesus, loves us, and that we can go on living any old way we want, and hating, and being divisive, and being gossipy, and being unforgiving, because it's the currency of the gospel that we live.

And of course, that we accept Christ's authority. That's the last section here. The authority of Jesus questioned, because the Jewish religious believer, the religious leaders reckoned only someone with great authority who could ever say anything against the temple.

[29 : 01] So they asked Him about His authority. They always used to do that about Jesus. But actually they were afraid of Him, and they wanted Him dead because of what He did and because of what He said.

They weren't willing to accept His authority, so Jesus didn't tell them. Which is quite often what He did. He answered a question with a question. It's quite a good technique sometimes, answer a question with a question.

If you think the question isn't being asked genuinely, which Jesus obviously reckoned it wasn't on their behalf. But they were afraid of Him. They wanted Him dead.

They knew that He was a threat to their power and their authority and to the way that they were living. But you know, they didn't need to be afraid of Him.

In Matthew 23 and verse 37, Jesus says, Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing to see a land of slay desolate.

[30 : 14] They didn't have been afraid. Jesus loved them and He wanted them to come in faith to recognize His authority. You might be afraid today of Jesus.

You might be afraid of what He means in your life if you give your life to Him. You might still think He's mean and nasty like a surface reading of the fig tree in the temple and angry with an uncontrolled anger.

But can you see beyond that and see His purpose and see the symbolism and see the control and the message and the unparalleled love of what He was doing that has redeemed Bobby and Sarah and that they can as covenant parents share with Phoebe, recognizing that great privilege that is ours.

Whose authority are you listening to every day and in every decision? It's the biggest question that we all have to answer in our hearts.

It's the biggest question you will be faced with this week. You will be faced with all kinds of questions this week. That's the biggest and most important you will ever have to face. Who governs

your heart?

[31 : 38] Who's your Lord? And it's a challenge I think for all of us. Amen. Let's pray. Father we thank You for who You are.

We thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the amazing truth that it holds. Give us when we are unable with words to really get across Your truth but we believe in faith that when we go with Your Word and when we declare Your revelation then You will do Your work through that.

However weak and stumbling that will be. And we commit this truth to every heart today that we would see Your unparalleled love. Can we ever imagine that in 2000 there's someone so important as Jesus Christ.

God in the flesh who did the most remarkable transaction for us before we were even conceived or thought about or nearly existing.

Lord help us to see that great love and recognize that amazing power in prayer and in relationship with You which is an evidence of that great resurrection power that is ours in Jesus.

[32 : 52] So bless us and bless us as we move into the baptism. We thank You so much for that privilege, for that again that symbol, a visual symbol of what Your promises and of Your work among us.

We rejoice in it so much. Bless us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.