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A Season for Figs? (Mark 11. 1-14)

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‘Hobbits really are amazing creatures’, said the wizard Gandalf the Grey in Tolkien’s, *Lord of the Rings*. ‘You can learn all there is to know about their ways in a month, and yet after a hundred years, they can still surprise you’. It might be not the best analogy but these words came to mind as I pondered our gospel reading this week. The gospels really are amazing texts. You can read them in an afternoon, and yet after a lifetime they can still surprise you.

I thought I was pretty much across Palm Sunday. The donkey or colt, borrowed according to Jesus’ directions; the mock triumphal entry; the palm branches and hosannas; the consternation of the authorities; all signifying the beginning of the end. And these are indeed key elements of this story, which functions in all four gospels as a messianic announcement. Matthew and John explicitly reference the prophecy that’s being fulfilled. From Zechariah: ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (9.9).

So far, so familiar. But what’s struck me, reading Mark’s rendering of these events, is how overtly theatrical the whole episode is – how much like an elaborate piece of performance art. It begins with Jesus’ detailed instructions about how to obtain the necessary prop – the ‘colt that has never been ridden’. The disciples are told where they will find it, what they’re to say if anyone asks about it, how it will be returned ‘immediately’ – because, after all, it just a stage prop, required for a single scene. And what I love about this passage are those vivid little details that give texture to Mark’s writing. The colt is discovered to be ‘tied near a door’, ‘outside in the street’. The disciples bring it to Jesus, he sits on it, there’s the spreading of cloaks and the waving of branches – but not just any branches; ‘leafy branches that they

had cut in the fields'. The scene all seems to be building to something. But then, says the text, Jesus 'entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve'.

That's it?! All that theatre, all that fuss about finding the colt, making the entry, after which he just turns around and goes back out of the city again? In Matthew and Luke's accounts, Jesus does build on the energy he's begun to generate. Once he enters Jerusalem and goes to the temple, he straightaway starts turning over tables – his messianic entry followed immediately by messianic action. But in Mark, it seems a major anti-climax. Jesus does the symbolic ingress, cures the joint, then goes home for tea. It was getting late after all. Which means that the next day he has to come back in, though this time rather less dramatically and under his own steam.

What's this about? I wonder if part of what Mark is wanting to emphasise is the absolute deliberateness of Jesus' actions as he moves towards the culmination of his mission and life. His absolute consciousness of what he's doing. Just as John's Jesus insists, that *he* chooses his 'hour', so Mark's Jesus is at this point totally in control of the pace of events and the signification of his actions. In this dramatic scheme, the entry to Jerusalem is like the first scene of the final act. The cursing of the fig tree is the second. And though this particular tree can't justifiably be blamed for not bearing fruit, 'for it was not the season for figs', the gospel makes this luckless tree represent Israel's religious establishment – the fig tree, itself, being a traditional biblical metaphor for Israel. This tree looks so promisingly leafy, but Jesus judges it for its failure to offer food to satisfy his hunger. And having enacted this judgement, he then re-enters Jerusalem and this time goes about driving the merchants from the Temple. It's *now* that he chooses symbolically to upend the reigning religio-politico-economic system of his day.

Well, over this Lenten season, we too have been reflecting on aspects of the reigning systems of our day. We've been prompted by the emerging literature of

‘recovery’ from Covid-19 and, like Jesus, we sense the fruitlessness of some of the systems and assumptions that have been running our lives. We’ve been exploring what a spiritual perspective, a commitment to the work of prayer and maturation, might have to offer for the renewal of the whole, and so have touched on various themes. We’ve reflected on ways of relating to difference and division, and the increasing polarisation of discourse; how shared reverence for ‘country’ and contemplative awareness of the sacredness of place, might be a condition of deepening understanding between First Nations and ‘settler’ peoples in Australia, and the true flourishing of indigenous communities. We’ve explored what it could mean if, as a culture, we remembered the significance of forming people for wisdom as well as educating them for the workplace. And, thanks to many of your reflections, we’ve recognised how spiritual practice affects what happens in the myriad of ordinary interactions that constitute the fabric of daily life. In all this, I’ve been seeking to show that there is a spiritual dimension to human flourishing, and that contemplative practice has a real contribution to make to the ‘better world our hearts know is possible’.

The question that I and other members of our community are now asking is, what do we do about this conviction? This sense that there is something to offer? We’ve explored it among ourselves – but how might we speak of it more broadly? Jesus performed a set of highly charged symbolic actions to make God’s challenge and resource visible in his context. What form might our testimony take? A collection of essays, like those in *Upturn*, contributed by members of our community and others? Creating a context for sharing stories about initiatives sourced in this way of being? Collaboration with others who recognise the significance of spiritual life in the re-creation of our world? I’m not sure – and again, if you have thoughts about what (if any) further action our reflections might lead to, then I’d love to hear.

For it seems to me that the whole literature of recovery and our engagement with it is premised on the sense that, as a society, we’re encountering or coming towards major tipping points. Tables are being overturned in the temple. Protest is

rising in the service of new life. There's growing demand to reform the way our economies and political systems work; momentum is gaining towards transformation of the energy sector and our ecological stewardship. Here in Australia there's deep reckoning underway in relationship to the place of First Nations peoples, as well as with pervasive sexual violence and the abuse of women. In secular as well as religious contexts, there's increasing call to 'change' our collective 'mind', to 'repent' ... not only of certain behaviours, but of alienated ways of seeing and being that for too long have disconnected us from each other and the natural world.

There is of course resistance, backlash, to these calls for radical change. And there are times when we doubt whether it really is possible to overthrow the 'rulers of this world'. Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that we are trembling on the brink of a 'season *for figs*', a season of renewal based in the widespread yearning for authentic abundance and sharing of life. And maybe part of the offering of communities such as ours, communities rooted by prayer in the transforming energy of God's own life, is simply to hold faith with this possibility and promise. And to give ourselves for it, however, wherever and as wholly as we can.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the culmination of Jesus' self-giving for the life of the world. He knows that at a certain point, it will look as though it's all been for nothing; as though the system has triumphed, closed down the fragile possibilities just beginning to be glimpsed. He gives himself anyway and this is the key that unlocks the energy of grace, and a whole new kind of power in the world. Christianity is born from the testimony that the apparently triumphant backlash by the rulers of the world is in the end unable to overcome God's will that all should live. As we enter into Holy Week, then, let us entrust ourselves to this testimony; and let us be strengthened for our own self-giving by sharing the journey of the One who gives himself for us.