

21.10-11). But for “the chief priests and elders of the people” there was a deeper issue – “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” (v. 23)

It wasn’t yet time for Jesus to declare himself publicly. His remarkable response left them unable to pursue the matter further for the present.

But then Jesus went on to tell the parable of the two sons. The issue is that the father wants his two sons to go and work in the vineyard. “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” Clearly, the one who changed his mind and went. That is to say, he repented.

It could be inferred from this parable that some folk don’t need to repent – they are already in the Father’s “good books”. This was the assumption of these Jewish leaders. But, as Paul wrote later, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3.22b-23). The gospel graciously calls all to repent and believe.

“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt. 21.31c). Why should that be? Does God have a preference for the “marginalised”, as liberation theology suggests? Not so. God’s welcome is for “a broken and a contrite heart” (Ps. 51.17). The tax collectors and prostitutes had believed the preaching of John – “and even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him” (Matt. 21.32).

Reflect:

- Why might it have seemed “easier” for tax collectors and prostitutes to “repent and believe” than for the Jewish leaders?
- Do some people want to belong to God’s people without repentance and faith? Why is this so?
- How significant do we find this reiteration of the theme with which the ministry of Jesus began?

Study 4. The Right to Rule. Reading: Matthew 21.33-46

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Five Lenten Studies
by Peter J Blackburn

3. Repent and Believe

Reading: Matthew 21.12-32

A few years ago, a cargo ship, the Anro Asia, was heading towards the port of Brisbane. Disastrously, it ended up grounded on the Caloundra bar, having failed to make the turn that would take it between Moreton and Bribie Islands.

For those of us familiar with driving on roads, making a turn is a relatively simple matter – slowing down is the major consideration. With a large ship in the open ocean, it is another matter. A turn needs to begin several kilometres out to sea

That’s the effect of the physical laws of inertia and momentum on turning a large ship at sea.

For a whole different set of reasons, it can be incredibly difficult for a human being to turn around. Has this ever happened to us? We are out driving. We think we know the way to go. The further we get along the road, the more uncertain we are. Is this the right way after all? It’s amazing how far we can go before we finally admit we are heading the wrong way!

The ministry of John the Baptist called people to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 3.2). Jesus began his ministry with this same call (4.17). Mark records the words of Jesus this way, “The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mk 1.15).

The word “repent” refers to a change of mind leading to a change of direction. True conversion is always a two-fold turn of repentance and faith – a turning **from** sin **to** God.

Reflect:

- “It can be incredibly difficult for a human being to turn around”. Why is that so?
- We sometimes think of repentance as sorrow or regret for something we have done. In this sense, Judas Iscariot was “seized with remorse” (Matt. 27.3). Why is it important to think and talk in terms of a “two-fold turn”?

The Withering Fig Tree**Read: Matthew 21.12-22.**

It was immediately after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem that Jesus cleansed the temple. The buying and selling and money-changing were an offence to God and a barrier to true worship – the very purpose of the temple.

The justification for what was going on was the need to present sacrifices of animals and birds that were without any defect. It was insisted further that money offered to God must be in Jewish currency, not in Roman coins bearing the image of Caesar.

The reality was that this trade was set up by the priests for their own financial gain, prompting the angry action of Jesus, and his words, “It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers’.” (v. 13)

The first part of these words of Jesus is a reference to Isaiah 56. The Lord was making it clear that “foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him...” (v. 6) will be acceptable in the Lord’s “house of prayer” – “for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (v. 7). And where was all this trading going on? In the court of the Gentiles – the only part of the temple open to non-Jews.

The second part refers to Jeremiah 7.11 – “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord”.

The fig tree is deciduous. Fruit appears first, before the leaves, or both appear about the same time. A tree with leaves should also have had fruit. The cursing and withering of the fig tree amazed the disciples and was used by Jesus as a lesson in the prayer of faith.

This act, however, was more than an illustration of the power of Jesus over nature (as in Mt. 8.23-27). It was a sign of divine judgment on the barrenness of Jewish leadership and religious life. The Lord had every reason to expect fruit.

In Jeremiah 8, part of the Lord’s judgment on the people who have turned away from the Lord is that “I will take away their harvest... There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them” (v. 13).

Reflect:

- John the Baptist called people to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Lk. 3.8). What “fruit” is our Lord wanting to find in his people today?

Repent and Believe!**Read: Matthew 21.23-32.**

The triumphal entry followed by the cleansing of the temple were a direct challenge and affront to the Jewish leadership. (It is unlikely they knew about the withering of the fig tree). Luke records the objection of some of the Pharisees to the triumphal entry and loud hosannas, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Lk. 19.40). This is followed by his sorrow over the coming overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem – “because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you” (v. 44).

The people were asking, “Who is this?” The bland, matter-of-fact answer is “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matt.