

He Found Nothing But Leaves

"He came if haply he might find anything thereon . . . and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves"
(Mk. 11:13).

Our readings in Mark have brought us to the last week of Christ's ministry. Since the raising of Lazarus he had spent a few weeks east of Jordan, and is now returning with his disciples.

At the end of chapter 10 they pass through Jericho. From here to Jerusalem was about fifteen miles—a steady climb out of the valley into the mountains—a rise in altitude of nearly a mile. Bethany lay on the route, about two miles from Jerusalem, at the eastern edge of the built-up Jerusalem suburbs—from there on down to Jericho was through barren hills. It was on this route that the parable of the Good Samaritan was laid.

At the times of the yearly feast (and this was one of them) this road was filled with travelers coming down to Jerusalem from Galilee and the north.

As chapter 11 opens, Jesus and his disciples are in the vicinity of Bethany and Bethphage, the latter being between Bethany and Jerusalem and apparently the village where, in verse 2, he sends two disciples for a colt. Matthew here refers us to Zechariah—

"This was done that it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion: behold, thy King cometh unto thee. He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass."

(It is interesting to note that for "having salvation" the margin in Zechariah 9:9 has "saving himself.")

"Lowly, and riding upon an ass." The ass was a very common animal, a beast of burden and humility and peaceful activity, in sharp contrast to the horse, a symbol of pride, rulership and war.

Israel were forbidden to multiply horses, and in harmony with this we find in their early history their judges riding upon asses. Later their kings, in earthly splendor, turned to horses.

The prophecy in Zechariah immediately continues—

"I will cut off the horse and the battlebow . . . and he shall speak peace to the nations . . . and his dominion shall be from sea to sea . . ."

—this lowly king who comes into his kingdom riding upon an ass. Surely the thoughtful Jew from Zechariah's day on must have wondered and pondered over this strange prophecy!

The ass was one "on which never man had sat." Two points are emphasized in this, uniqueness and separation. Jesus, we remember, was laid in a tomb "where never man had laid." In his life and death, he broke new ground—opening a "new and living way" which never man before had trod.

But there is another aspect. In the Law, the red heifer which was sacrificed and burnt to provide the ashes of separation that were used to cleanse anyone unclean, must be one which had never borne a yoke—never been used for any other purpose. Its whole life and existence must be entirely devoted to the one cause.

No man can satisfactorily serve two masters. If he tries, he will fail in both. "No man that is called to be a soldier entangleth himself in the affairs of this life." (What an unsuspected depth of meaning there is in that word "entangleth!")

"They found the colt tied by a door without, in a place where two ways met" (Mk. 11:4).

What is the reason for putting that in? Perhaps it is to give us a sense of sign and symbolism in these events. We remember that the events of this day were the climax and turning-point of Christ's mission to Israel. All that went before was building up to this.

This day he was to be presented to them as the divinely-sent King and Savior, and they were to joyfully accept him as such. But, within a week, what a change was to occur, and with what long and bitter consequences for Israel!

Surely Israel stood, this day, *“by a door – (‘I am the Door’) – in a place where two ways met.”* One way was *“Hosanna to the Son of David”* – the other was: *“Crucify him!”*

What are we to learn from the method of taking the colt? Jesus told them to just walk up and take it, and if the owner questioned them to simply say: *“The Lord hath need of him.”* No request, no explanation.

Is not this the lesson of Job? *“The Lord hath need of him.”* The Lord’s purposes and the deep counsel of His wisdom requires things a certain way. Man may not understand, but *his* wisdom lies in believing and readily accepting the will of the Lord in faith.

There is something marvellous in the statement itself: *“The Lord had need of him.”* How could the Lord have need of *anything*? Of all the wonders of creation, there is nothing to compare with the wonder of creating personalities which can, through trial and sorrow, become fit to minister to God’s eternal pleasure and fellowship. *“The Lord hath need of him.”* God does not rest upon His Own divine all-sufficiency, but seeks the love and companionship of man.

Having brought the colt to Jesus, they spread their garments on it, and he sat thereon. In this coronal procession, as the King came to his royal city, the furnishings of his mount were not the usual jewelled and gorgeous equipage of royalty, but the common clothes of his humble followers.

The natural mind will say: *“What a haphazard makeshift for such an important occasion! How much better it would have been to have planned it properly and have gotten suitable equipment! How much more orderly and impressive it would have been!”*

We need only think back to the splendors of Solomon’s court – the wonder of his age – to see the contrast with this one who came claiming to be his greater and more majestic son.

But there is far more depth and significance and beauty in this scene, and in the use of the common work-clothes of his followers, than in all the empty trappings of Solomon’s external splendor.

John records at this point that much people, when they heard that Christ was coming, went to meet him, carrying palm-branches and crying, *“Hosanna to the Son of David.”* Here we see enacted a symbol of Christ’s later approach from the east to the Holy City with the 144,000, bearing the palms of victory in their hands and singing the Song of Moses and the Lamb.

And so this ever-increasing procession advanced toward the Holy City, just as eventide was approaching. The road led over the southern slope of the Mount of Olives, which up to this point in the journey obscured the view of the city. But Luke says that as they came to the descent of the Mount of Olives – that is, as they reached the crest of the road and the city came into view – there was a spontaneous burst of song –

“The whole multitude began to rejoice and to praise God with a loud voice” (19:37).

But there were two exceptions to the general rejoicing, as we learn from Luke. On the one hand some of the Pharisees said, *“Master, rebuke thy disciples.”* It is quite evident they were displeased and out of harmony with the spirit of the event.

Doubtless they sincerely felt it was presumption and blasphemy. Doubtless they also felt it was a very undignified and unseemly proceeding, out of harmony with solemn, restrained religious worship and liable to bring upon them the restrictions of the Romans.

And as the acknowledged religious leaders of the people, they would resent any popular religious movement that was outside of their own initiative and control. Probably this latter would be the most powerful motive of their annoyance, though they would not recognize it as such.

But there was another who did not enter into the general rejoicing, though for a far different reason.

“And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!” (v. 41-42)

“At least in this thy day!” The great day of crisis and of opportunity for Jerusalem came—and passed, and they did not know.

He was not deceived by the fickle Hosannas of the multitude. He knew that within a week all this shallow enthusiasm would have melted away and he would be standing in Pilate’s judgment hall, looking out alone upon a human sea of malice and hate, self-hypnotized by the chant of “*Crucify him, crucify him!*”

From the crest of the Mount of Olives road, as the palm-bearing and singing multitude approached from the east, the whole city lay spread out before them. On the left, to the far south, was Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom; above that, within the south wall, the royal hill of Zion.

Before them, in the valley between them and the city, was the Garden of Gethsemane, which would mean nothing to the multitude, but much to Christ as he gazed on the scene.

At the north end of the city (now looking toward the right) was the gleaming white Temple, built by an Edomite usurper who had striven to destroy the royal Heir at his birth. Edom is the same root as Adam—red earth. The Temple truly stood for the flesh—the very symbol Jesus himself used—shining in its whitewashed hypocrisy of external religious pretension and internal fleshly bickering and hate.

God was in His holy Temple—but *not in this one*. The glory had departed from this spot six hundred years before, as Ezekiel saw in vision. God was in the Temple He had prepared for Himself—the spiritual Temple that this fleshly Temple was even now plotting to destroy, and did destroy. But in three days God raised it up again.

And further north—beyond the city wall—the hill of Calvary.

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“And Jesus entered into Jerusalem, and into the temple: and when he had looked round about upon all things, and now the eventide was come, he went out unto Bethany with the twelve.”

“And when he had looked about upon all things” —another of those strange expressions that lead to so much thought! Here was his final survey—his final evaluation. And how sadly short it fell of what might, and should, have been!

“He came if haply he might find anything thereon, and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves” —

—nothing but outward pretence and show.

It was now evening. The dark night was closing down upon Jerusalem, and Jesus and the twelve disciples went back over the Mount of Olives to spend the night in Bethany with Lazarus, Mary and Martha.

In the morning, on the return journey to Jerusalem, the scene of the previous evening, and its consequences, is enacted in impressive symbol, as recorded in verses 13-14 —

“And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came if haply he might find anything thereon . . . and he found nothing but leaves, and he said, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter forever.”

Fig leaves. Ever since the Garden of Eden they have been a symbol of a vain attempt to conceal barrenness and nakedness. The fig was a slowly-maturing tree, requiring several years of patient, hopeful labor. When matured, it was very prolific, bearing two crops a year. Hence it became a symbol of well-established plenty and prosperity, long waited for.

In the Kingdom age, every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree. So Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, saw Nathanael—the “*Israelite indeed in whom there was no guile*”—sitting under his fig tree.

In connection with a former destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah in vision saw Israel as figs—good and evil.

The fig tree was remarkable in that the fruit began at the same time as the leaves, unless the tree were barren. The statement “*For the time of figs was not yet*” seems a little out of harmony with the picture, but the simplest meaning seems to be that the ripe-fruit time, the *picking* time, was not yet, so there should be fruit. A comparison of the wording of similar passages supports this.

We note, “*He was hungry.*” He needed the fruit, just as we have seen in the case of the ass—“*The Lord hath need of him*” — The fig tree had the honored opportunity of ministering to his needs, and it failed. He was hungry, and it gave him no meat.

In the parable of the fig tree, in Luke 13, the householder says: “*These three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none.*” We wonder whether God has come to inspect our accounts, and has said: “*No fruit yet — just leaves.*” And how much longer before the edict is pronounced: “*Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?*”

It is notable that this was Christ's only miracle of cursing, and it was upon a tree. The only other miracle in any way comparable is the destruction of the swine in connection with the healing of the demoniac. There it was animals. To round out the picture, it was fitting and necessary that his judicial, as well as healing power be manifested, but only in a symbolic way, on animals and trees, for his mission at that time was to save men's lives, not to destroy them.

The closest he ever comes to harming human beings is in the next verse of this chapter, where he cleanses the Temple—another vivid and deeply symbolic manifestation of the power and authority he possessed.

The Temple was both the proudest and the most sacred spot in the nation—the center of the glory, dignity and responsibility of the ruling priesthood.

“Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise” (Jn. 2:16). What was wrong with selling sacrificial animals and providing the necessary money-changing facilities? These were not only not wrong—they were essential. But the trouble was that these necessary things kept growing and closing in until they obscured, and then overshadowed, and finally smothered the spiritual.

“It is written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13).

That was the great and central divine purpose in the Temple and in the Jewish nation—a nation of priests to manifest His Holy Name to the Gentiles—but it had become hopelessly bogged down in merely natural, fleshly things.

This is one of the biggest things we have to fight today—to keep the perfectly legitimate natural from swamping the spiritual. The Gospel of God is the most wonderful and most holy thing among men—it is the power of eternal perfection and redemption—but the great problem is to keep it held up high and clean and separate from natural things.

We have no illusion about this hall being the House of God, but inasmuch as it is devoted to the service of God and proclamation of His eternal, saving Truth, we are under responsibility to keep it clear from all that is merely natural or social.

Paul emphasized the same lesson and the same ever present danger when he wrote to the Corinthians: *“What, have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?”* The spiritual—never too strong in this dispensation of weakness—was, as ever, being crowded and suffocated by the robust companionship and pleasure of the flesh.

The next day, passing the same way, they discovered the fig tree *“dried up from the roots.”* Upon their exclaiming at it, Jesus brought out the greatest lesson involved—

“HAVE FAITH IN GOD. Whosoever shall say to this mountain, Be cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart – he shall have whatsoever he saith”
(vs. 22-23).

No obstacle can stand before the power of Faith. Now abideth these three—Faith, Hope and Love. Faith is the first, the foundation, the root, blossoming into Hope, and bringing forth the fruit of Love.

What is Faith? Both Paul and James made it clear that Faith is the power and driving force that makes men act contrary to nature and in defiance of human wisdom.

Faith does not consist of a passive acceptance of certain doctrines—it is an *active, living way of life*. Faith, says Paul, is the power that made Noah give his life to building the ark; that made Abraham leave everything behind and wander as an alien for one hundred years; that made Moses turn his back on the luxuries of Egypt and throw in his lot with a rabble in a wilderness because they were—in their destiny and their potentialities—the people of God.

“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

Faith is not ignorant superstition, or surface emotion. Faith is deep rooted in knowledge, though there are many shallow imitations that only time and testing can reveal.

Jesus here tells his disciples that prayer without Faith is useless. There is no use praying unless our way of life gives evidence that we believe God not only can, but WILL, take full care of those who seek Him.

"He that cometh to God must believe that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him"
(Heb.11:6).

There is no use professing faith while at the same time giving evidence in our lives that we have more confidence in the protective power of worldly goods, or worldly organizations, or worldly companies whose guarantees of protection we buy.

But what else does Jesus here say is essential to effectual prayer?

"And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also may forgive you"
(v. 25).

There is a form of forgiveness—cold, patronising and self-righteous—that is worse than no forgiveness at all. True forgiveness, as Jesus makes clear, is that kind we ourselves hope to get from God. It is not a matter of writing off the offence, and letting the barrier remain—unless we are quite content to be so treated by God.

There is a proud and evil human saying, "I forgive, but I do not forget"—a selfish attitude that seeks the personal gratification of granting forgiveness without assuming any of its humility or burden. Here again—would that type of forgiveness from God satisfy us, when we ask Him to *blot out our failures from His memory?*

Jesus is always slipping a few words that upset our carefully-framed picture, and make it so hard for the flesh. Speaking of the fate of the unmerciful debtor, he says—

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye FROM YOUR HEARTS forgive not every one his brother" (Matt. 18:35).

"From your hearts"—there is the key. We must get resentment and irritation clean out of our hearts, or they will poison us and bring us down to death.

At the end of the chapter the rulers, incensed by the events of these three days, come to him in another attempt to trap him in his words. What was his authority for doing these things?

But he gave them an answer which, while perfectly relevant to the question—as all the eagerly listening multitude would perceive—still turned their question against themselves.

He asked them, *"Was John's authority of God or of man?"* The point and relevantly of his answer lay in the fact that John proclaimed himself as being sent for the very purpose of testifying to, and preparing the way for, Christ. John publicly and dramatically, as the climax of his mission, identified Christ as the Messiah.

Jesus simply reminded his questioners that he and John stood or fell together, and that they could answer their own question by telling where John got *his* authority.

Here the divine wisdom and mercy is shown in sending John to lay the foundation for the work of Christ. John was in line with what the people would naturally expect of a prophet. He was wholly and harmoniously within the established framework of the Mosaic system. But his work was to teach them to expect and be prepared for a change.

So it is with the unfolding of the divine purpose. It is precept upon precept, line upon line, each built upon that which preceded. The rulers rejected Christ because they rejected John. But the people accepted John and still rejected Christ. How could that be? In the same way they accepted Moses and rejected Christ. Jesus told them, "*He (John) was a burning and a shining light, and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light*" (Jn. 5:35).

"For a season." But there was no permanent effect—no depth of earth—no true comprehension of the purpose—above all, *no fundamental change of life*, for John's basic mission was to bring about a national purification and renewal of heart. His warning was: "*The ax is laid to the root of the tree*" (Lk. 3:9)—the barren Israel fig tree. Therefore he exhorts with imperative urgency—"*Bring forth fruits – fruits meet for repentance*" (3:8).

But no fruit came—only more leaves—a prolific and showy display of the fig leaves of piety and religious pretence. But no fruit—none of the essential inward fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness—so the Roman ax descended, and the Israel fig tree fell, and lay downtrodden and prostrate for eighteen long and terrible centuries.

But now, in the great cycles of God's purpose, the fig tree is again putting forth leaves, and soon the King will come again from the east to seek the fruit, and to present himself to the royal city.

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