



## THE KING'S HOMECOMING

Mark 10:46-11:26

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Over the last several chapters in the Gospel According to St. Mark, King Jesus has been making his way towards his rightful home in the capital city of Jerusalem. Yet when Jesus finally entered Jerusalem in what should have been his homecoming, he didn't take up residence in the temple palace. He couldn't move in because his house had failed inspection. In fact, it was in such bad shape that it had to be condemned. So Jesus set about building a new and better house, one big enough for all his subjects to live in as well. As we'll see in our study of this passage, Jesus invites us to follow him home and come on in.

### FOLLOW THE KING HOME (MARK 10:46-11:11)

There is a famous Old Testament story of the prophet Elijah passing on his life work to his protegee Elisha. Before the transition, Elijah said, "What do you want me to do for you?" Elisha asked that God's special anointing might pass from his master on to him. It was a big request, and Elijah didn't say whether it would be granted or not. But when the moment of transition came, Elijah's mantle fell to Elisha. It was a sign that Elisha had indeed received this special anointing. He would be Elijah's successor and continue the ministry that Elijah had begun.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus invites his disciples to take up his mantle. Or, to put it in Mark's language, to follow Jesus "on the way," a frequent expression in Mark 8-10. All along, there's been a two-way tension between Jesus and his disciples: Jesus wasn't leading the way the disciples wanted, and the disciples weren't following the way Jesus wanted.

Jesus was looking for disciples like Elisha, who would follow in exactly the same trajectory as his mentor, and thus take up his mantle. The disciples, however, wanted something different. They wanted Jesus' to conform his mission to their own desires and expectations. They wanted to keep their own mantles rather than take up his.

Of course, this is the fundamental tension in Christianity. We want to make Christianity into a system that we can shape according to our preferences. We want to strip away the personal relationship with God and make Christianity conform to the lives that we have already planned for ourselves. So, if you plan to travel the world and do international development, then of course you want to strip Christianity of any personal relationship with God and make it all about

traveling the world and doing international development. Or if you want to stay here in the States and live the American Dream, then of course you want to strip Christianity of any personal relationship with God and make it into a system that reinforces the American Dream. Through reading the Bible superficially, we can reinforce whatever outcome we desire.

But when we read the Gospels in context, the unmistakable conclusion is that a relationship with Jesus is at the heart of Christianity. At the very center, the risen Lord Jesus Christ is saying, “Come. Follow me.” He calls us to hand over the reins of our lives and put him in charge. Jesus guarantees that joining him “on the way” is the way to enjoy life to the fullest, both in the present age and in eternity. Yet giving him control is the very thing we are most reticent to do.

You may remember from Mark 10:35-45 the two disciples who approached Jesus with a special request, and Jesus asked them the same question that Elijah asked Elisha: “What do you want me to do for you?” But instead of saying, “Let us follow in *your* footsteps,” they asked for privilege and rank, saying, “make us your top officials.” This was the opposite of what Jesus had been teaching them all along. They wanted Jesus to bless their own mantles, rather than take up his.<sup>1</sup>

*Blind Beggar Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52).* On the very last leg of the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus finally found someone who would pick up his mantle. Blind Beggar Bartimaeus became Jesus' model disciple; the prototype for every Christian.

Blind Beggar Bartimaeus had four problems. His name tells us three: He was blind. He was a beggar. And he was despised by the people, who kept rebuking him. (There's a wordplay with his name, as the words for rebuke, honor and “Timaesus” all sound quite similar in Greek.) But the worst problem of all is that he was “beside the way.” (10:46) He wasn't “on the way” with Jesus.

So he called out to Jesus, who *was* “on the way.” He said, v. 47, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” By calling Jesus “Son of David,” he recognized Jesus as the coming King—which was a very good way to start.

In v. 48, the crowd rebuked him (which is part of a larger play on words regarding his name.) “Shut up, you ‘Son of Rebuke!’” But Blind Beggar Bartimaeus didn't listen to the crowd. He knew that they weren't *his* master. As it says in v 48, he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

In v 49, Jesus stopped. He refused to take another step forward and leave someone behind who genuinely wanted to follow him. Take note of the incredible mercy and patience of the Lord, who will delay his own plans in order to care for broken people discarded along the way.

Jesus called back to Blind Beggar Bartimaeus to follow. Think of the exhilaration and joy of hearing the words spoken here: “Take heart. Get up. He is calling you.” The King has invited you to join his entourage. After years of rejection, now come with us. *We want you.*

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<sup>1</sup> “If the Son of God stoops down, who are we to try to stand any taller? It's better to be a servant of the King of the Universe than king of your own little hill.” Shawn Honey, January 25, 2015.

In v. 50, Bartimaeus threw off his cloak. Why? Was he doing what the rich man couldn't do, by leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus? Did he know that he was about to receive Jesus' mantle instead?

In any case, v 51, Jesus asked him what he asked John and James, and what Elijah asked Elisha: "What do you want me to do for you?"

And Bartimaeus said, "Rabbi,"—or more precisely, "Rabboni," which means "My master,"—"Let me recover my sight." He needed to be able to see in order to follow the Lord.

In v 52, Jesus healed him, and then put his faith to the test, saying "Go your way; your faith has made you well." How would Bartimaeus use his recovered vision? Would he use it to pick up his old mantle and go his own way? Or would he choose to make his way the way of Rabboni, master and Lord?

Bartimaeus didn't hesitate. He knew that what he needed most was to be "on the way" with Jesus. It didn't matter where home was, as long as he was with the King. So the vignette ends with these words (v. 52): he "followed him on the way." Finally, a disciple who picked up Jesus' mantle rather than asking Jesus to bless his own. On they went, together, into Jerusalem.

*The "Triumphal Entry" (Mark 11:1-11).* The story continues in 11:1 with perhaps the most ironic and ambiguous vignette in all the Gospels, the so-called Triumphal Entry. What makes it ironic and ambiguous is that only a few days after the crowds shout "Hosanna" (Save us!) here, they shout "Crucify him" and condemn their new King to death. There's an even deeper irony in this, since it is through his death that he saves (Hosanna), dying in order to save us from death.

The details in this vignette are important. Jesus said to go find a colt tied up at such and such a place, and if people asked about it, then to tell them such and such. And in fact all of these details were just as Jesus had said. And the reason that this is so important is that if Jesus was right about all these little details, then he must have been right about the larger meaning and purpose of his homecoming in Jerusalem. Three times along the way he had spoken plainly and clearly of what would happen when he got there. The authorities would arrest, torture and crucify him, and then after three days he would rise from the dead. So if Jesus was right about the colt tied up at the village gate, then he must be right about Good Friday and Easter.

So it was that Jesus rode the final leg of the journey into Jerusalem, down the Mount of Olives, and up to through the Eastern Gate of the Temple, known as the Golden Gate. If you've been to the Mount of Olives, you'll remember the beauty of the olive grove going down, and then the austerity of the cemetery going back up to the Temple. There is a longstanding Jewish expectation that when the Messiah comes, he will ride into the Temple through the Golden Gate. And legend has it that it's because of this that the Ottomans filled in and sealed off the Golden Gate, and they put a muslim cemetery in front of it in order to contaminate the path so that no Jewish messianic hopefuls might try to retake the city. But the truth is that the Messiah already rode through that gate back on that first Palm Sunday. Yet when he did, he found his house in such bad shape that it had to be condemned.

*And he 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. Mark 11:11.*

Isn't that the strangest and most anti-climactic homecoming you've ever heard? For centuries, Jews had been waiting for the Messiah to come home. Years earlier, John the Baptist announced his coming and issued a call to prepare the way for his arrival. Months earlier, Jesus began a coronation march across the country. But after all this, when he finally arrived he found his home uninhabitable. He turned around and went back out to spend the night in the suburbs.

Jesus will take action to close the Temple in the next vignette. Before we take a look, let's remember what it means to follow the King. He promises that he will take us home, but he hasn't told us when we will get there, or the path that we will take. As Christians, where we most often tend to lose our way is in unmet expectations regarding the journey, anticipating that arrival is just around the corner, when in fact there may still be miles to go. The key to finding joy in the journey is coming to believe that it doesn't matter where Jesus leads us, so long as he is there. That's what he's been teaching his disciples over the last three chapters in the journey to Jerusalem. That's what he's been teaching us through all the twists and turns in the plots of our own stories. He's calling us to stop fighting him, stop asking to make him bless our own mantles, and instead become like Bartimaeus—merely overjoyed to be “on the way” with him. It's better to be following the King home, no matter where he leads us, than to be building our own kingdoms along the way.

## **THE PALACE IS OPEN; COME ON IN (MARK 11:12-25)**

If the first half of tonight's passage is ironic and ambiguous, the second half is just plain bizarre. Why on earth would Jesus curse a fig tree? The answer hinges on what Jesus did in the Temple, so let's first zoom in on that passage.

*The Temple Closing (Mark 11:15-19).* The explosion of the Ebola epidemic last year reminded me of the 1980s, when people were paranoid about contracting HIV. Remember how fear of clinics and hospitals spread across West Africa, because people believed that health care workers were spreading the virus? The same thing happened in the States back in the 1980s, when it was learned that people receiving blood transfusions were contracting HIV. Then in the early 1990s, there was a public scare after a rogue HIV+ dentist in South Florida intentionally and secretly infected six of his patients with HIV. So you can imagine the terror many people had about going to the doctor or the dentist. Likewise, you can imagine the fury of the President and the Surgeon General, because our *houses of healing* instead had become *dens of death*.

That's the same kind of fury Jesus had as he began to shut down the Temple in 11:15. Keep in mind what a temple is *for*. The Jerusalem Temple was supposed to be a new garden of Eden, a place where Creator and creatures could meet together and talk. And not just A place, but THE place, the supreme portal for communion with God. Just as if what you really need is justice, then THE place above all places where you ought to find it is the Supreme Court. In the same way, the Temple was THE place for all peoples, of every tribe and tongue, to go to find God.

Except that it wasn't. And it had been that way for a long time. Centuries before Jesus, the Temple leaders oppressed widows, orphans and foreigners (Jer 7:6); they stole, murdered, committed adultery, lied, and worshipped idols (Jer 7:9). This continued on and off for another 600 years, all the way up to Jesus' day. So you can imagine Jesus' fury when he finally entered the Temple, aware of how cut off from God the whole world was, aware of how much suffering and injustice there was among the people. Instead of finding the Temple to be a 'house of prayer for all nations,' it was still 'a den of robbers,' which is what Jeremiah had called it 600 years earlier.

Jesus wasn't mad about commerce in the temple, *per se*. Pilgrims needed sacrificial animals and the proper currency for offerings. So it's a wild misunderstanding of this passage when churches today won't let their youth group sell cookies in order to raise money for some worthy cause. Rather, what Jesus was mad about was the fundamental, centuries-old problem of the temple—it was no longer a house of prayer for all nations.

“Action speaks louder than words.” At the moment Jesus entered the Temple, his prophetic actions were more important than his speech. We pay a lot of attention to Jesus' words, and that's good, because we need to listen to him and learn from him. But we also need to read his actions with the same reverence and openness, learning from whatever he has to say through his deeds.

Put yourself in Jesus' shoes for a moment. Imagine the total and complete corruption of our government for more than 600 years. Every executive action, every law, every court decision is a crime against the people, benefiting only those in power. Imagine becoming President of such a nation, and making the inauguration journey down Pennsylvania Avenue to the iconic Capitol Building, once the global symbol of justice, but for centuries the emblem of corruption. Would you make a speech? Or would you take prophetic action, and swing a sledgehammer into the front steps?

In Mark 11:15, Jesus drove out all the sellers and shoppers, and he overturned tables and chairs. In v. 16 “he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.” In other words, he shut the place down. If it wasn't going to be a house of prayer for all nations, then he wouldn't allow it to be a den of robbers either. Thus Jesus didn't simply *cleanse* the temple as the subheading in our Bibles suggests. He *closed* the temple and put it out of business. Why? He did it out of love, and righteous anger, because the interface between God and man was so corrupt as to be beyond all repair.

*The Fig Tree (Mark 11:12-25)*. Now that we understand what Jesus did with the temple, we can scope out a bit, and make sense of why he cursed the fig tree. To the untrained eye, the cursing of the fig tree is one of the weirdest and most troubling vignettes in the Gospels. In *Why I Am Not A Christian*, the famous 20th Century skeptic Bertrand Russell pointed to this passage as evidence that Jesus was neither a saint nor a sage. And reading the passage at face value, I would have to agree. Why would Jesus curse a fig tree for not having any figs outside of fig season?

But there's much more to this vignette. Notice that the closing of the Temple, in 11:15-19, is sandwiched inside Jesus' cursing of the fig tree. First Jesus cursed the fig tree in v 14, then he closed the temple in 15-19, and then in v 20 we discover that the fig tree withered. This vignette sandwich is a giant billboard sign telling us that the cursing of the fig tree must be another

prophetic, symbolic action, just like what Jesus did in the Temple. So let's take a look at it from that angle.

*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. Mark 11:12-13.*

The most important thing to note in this verse is that the fig tree was "in leaf." This is important because of the way that fig trees grow. Fig trees bud in the fall, and then in the springtime their buds mature into unripe figs, called *paggim* (Hebrew). After all these *paggim* emerge, then all the leaves come out. And then all the *paggim* ripen. If you're hungry, you can eat the *paggim* before they ripen; they're just not as good as ripe figs. But beggars can't be choosers, and the *paggim* were good nourishment for people in need.

Look back at 11:1 for a moment. As Jesus made the final leg of his journey, from Jericho up to Jerusalem, he passed through two villages: Bethphagé and Bethany. Bethphagé means "house of *paggim*," house of unripe figs. Bethany means "house of figs."

Remember where Jesus and the Twelve spent the night in 11:11? Not in the corrupt Temple, but back in Bethany, the house of figs. Then, in v 12, as Jesus approached the Temple, he was hungry and he saw a fig tree *in leaf*. In other words, regardless of whether it was the season for figs, the leaves were a sign saying, "*paggim* for the eating, here." But when Jesus came closer, he discovered that the sign was lying. No figs, whether ripe or unripe, were to be found. So Jesus cursed the tree with this terrible curse in v14: "May no one ever eat from you again." Jesus had every reason to expect that there would be edible fruit on the tree. It's like stepping in to Starbucks, ordering a latte, and being told, "Sorry. No coffee. We only sell paper cups here." Curse them! May no one else ever have the same unmet expectation.

When we think about the closing of the Temple sandwiched right inside this vignette, we can make sense of what Jesus was doing when he cursed the fig tree. It was another symbolic, prophetic action. The fig tree, often a symbol for Israel, was signaling that it had fruit when in fact it did not. The Temple was doing the same. Its very presence communicated that it was open for business as THE way to connect with God. Jesus closed them both down because they weren't doing what they promised.

*A Better Palace (Mark 11:22-25).* Jesus wouldn't close down the Temple without offering something better in its place. What did he offer?

In 11:22-23, Jesus says that faith will replace "this mountain." Jesus is not saying that if you believe hard enough, concentrating all The Force on Mt. McKinley, that you can levitate it over the ocean just like Yoda did with Luke Skywalker's spaceship. Rather, he's saying that faith in God, through Jesus, is what is going to take the place of "this mountain," when the Temple on "this mountain" is destroyed. Being thrown into the sea is a Jewish figure of speech for coming under the wrath of God. Think of Jonah, or what Jesus said about having a millstone tied around your neck. The Temple is condemned for destruction, and its replacement is a house of faith, built on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.

In 11:24-25, Jesus invites us to come on in to his new house. Come enjoy those things that you have come to believe can only happen at the temple, namely prayer and forgiveness of sins. In the house of faith, you can do them anytime, anywhere. So go ahead and pray by faith. God will hear you. Believe it. You don't need the old temple in God's new house. And go ahead and forgive by faith. God will honor it. You don't need temple sacrifices anymore in God's new house. You are my ambassadors of God's forgiveness wherever you go.

In short, what Jesus is saying is that God's new house is still under construction, but he invites us to come on in and enjoy its benefits. The cornerstone of the house is the final temple sacrifice, the death and resurrection of Jesus, which will open a new way to God. The bricks of the house are living stones, made up of Christian believers from every tribe and tongue and nation. That's why the new house remains unfinished. But even while it's under construction, there's still no better place to live. So come on in, Jesus is saying. Go ahead and take advantage of the new temple, through prayer and reconciliation by faith.

What does this mean for us? People everywhere around the world now have access to God, no longer through a special place, but by way of a special person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we can receive forgiveness of sins and commune with God. It's what everyone in the world is longing for. Every lonely soul among us, every man with a father wound, every angry skeptic, every widow, orphan, and foreigner, every murderer, adulterer, liar, thief or idolater. It doesn't matter who you are. This is what you need. And it is to this great homecoming that the King is inviting you today. Come on in!