

## Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – April 5th 2009 Mark 11:1-25 Jesus, Mean and Wild

You will never find that awful word 'nice' in Mark's gospel. You will find 'compassionate', 'forgiving', 'gracious', yes, but not 'nice'. In fact you will often find the opposite sort of descriptions of Jesus, 'speaking sternly', or looking with 'anger and grief' at the religious leaders of his day. Certainly he was not 'meek and mild', but 'mean and wild' – he speaks of the unforgivable sin, of the horrific consequences of misleading children, of God being ashamed and displeased with someone at the last judgement. You hear the language of Jesus, who overturns swine, rebukes Peter, and is indignant with his disciples and calls people a 'faithless generation'. Mark's gospel is 'good news', but there is a certain wildness about Jesus.

*Annie Dillard* asks 'Does anyone realise the power we invoke? We should be issuing the congregation with crash helmets'. Here we are in the suburbs, wanting a nice Jesus, and instead we have this raging storm - this unpredictability. And never more so than when he enters the temple precincts. Here it is an ordinary day with people going about their commonplace religious practices, with the noise of gossip and bartering and the smells of the animals. And suddenly there is an explosion of anger as Jesus cracks a whip against the sides of the animals, and overturns tables spilling coins everywhere.

The anger of Jesus is not directed against the usual suspects that religious people get angry about, like sexual promiscuity, or alcohol, or commercialism, but actually something else, namely the fact that the one space in the temple, the court of the Gentiles, where the undesirables could get close enough to have a chance of hearing about God's love is full of self-obsessed Jewish nationalists! The people of God are so obsessed with ethnic purity that they had forgotten that they were to be light to all nations. Jesus' anger was directed against the politics of holiness.

Religious communities have this ability to trade the wonder and enormity of the Gospel for single-issue politics and agendas, so that the world always hears about what we are 'against', but never what we are 'for'. Not that issues of purity, holiness and liturgy are unimportant to Jesus. But as *Brennan Manning* the catholic priest says: 'The way we are with each other is the truest test of our faith. How we respond to the interruptions from people, how you deal with normal people in the normal confusion of a normal day is a better indication of your reverence for life than an anti-abortion bumper-sticker'.

Jesus is driving them out because this lies at the heart of Israel's faith. After all the temple was meant to be a symbol of God's dwelling in Israel for the sake of all nations, all peoples. But the temple now symbolised God's exclusion of all other nations. This generation in fact understood that Messiah would clear the temple of undesirables, Gentiles, aliens and foreigners not for them.

The chief priests and teachers of the law looked for a way to kill Jesus, because this was a prophet not of pious platitudes, but one who was striking at the heart of their power, which leads us on to the story of the fig-tree. The fig-tree is a symbol of Israel, in particular its religious leadership, which bore no fruit. There were signs of life in the leaves, but no fruit. Mark is making the point that the overturning of the tables is not simply a cleansing but a cursing of this institution. Everything will be broken down in Jesus' own body, but after three days it will be raised anew in His body, the new temple, dwelling place of God for all who would call on His name. Not on the basis of law, but simply by putting their trust in the grace of Jesus.

There is a need to be urgent about this message, but not to panic. We are to love the world, not cordon ourselves inside our institutions. We should relax in those things that can really be a barrier to loving people, but not in our ethics or our commitment to truth.