

(Palm Sunday evening)

Introduction

- Do you ever find yourself saying one thing but acting in a different way?
 - acknowledging that the 30mph speed limit is a good thing, that going over it substantially increases the risk of an accident - but you still go over it?
 - or this whole healthy eating, exercise thing...
- There are times when we do the same thing with the Bible:
 - we say we believe particular bits of it, but act as if we don't!
- In some ways tonight's passage contains an example of this:
 - "whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours"
 - we may say we believe it, but its not an easy passage to square up with our own experience of prayer!
- Come to this passage since it follows on from events of Palm Sunday morning
 - and Mike Parker pinched my idea of looking at Psalm 118!!
- So, let's work our way through this passage and see if we can cast any light!

Exposition

(20) In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

- Remember sequence:
 - daily journey up to Jerusalem;
 - this was the day after the clearing of the Temple (Monday), and all it had symbolised of how Jesus judged the religion of his day absolutely poverty stricken, unable to bring life, only rules and exploitation
 - next morning (Tuesday) come along... and see tree withered!
- Jesus' curse had come to pass.
 - not just partially, but completely;
 - not just the first signs of disease that might token it never producing fruit in the future;
 - withered from the roots - utterly destroyed

(21) Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

- Its easy for us to connect this tree with the one Jesus cursed, since all the clues in the earlier incident point to something further to happen, but the disciples wouldn't so easily make the connection;
 - busy day the day before!!
 - there will have been a lot on the minds of the disciples - a week bristling with tension and teaching
 - maybe lots of fig trees on the road?
- Jesus would have been well aware of the connection, but - as ever - gives the disciples space to make their own connections!
- And that which Peter observed (the withered tree) was worthy of comment:
 - "Rabbi, look!" - we'll come back to this in a second
- Notice what Jesus does not do at this point:
 - he offers no explanation of why he cursed the tree!
 - (that we must infer from the context)
 - speaks of the judgement coming on Israel for rejecting her Messiah
 - connects with the Temple being cleansed, the rejection of God by the Jews implicit in what Jesus had to do in the Temple
- Lets come back to the surprise with which the disciples greeted the withering:
 - there was no amazement at the meaning of the cursing - the implication of coming judgement on God's chosen people Israel;

- there is no amazement at the morality of destroying a living tree;
- no amazement at using such an incident to make a point!
- **Only** amazement is that Jesus' curse worked so **clearly, visibly, powerfully, and quickly!**
- have they not seen God act with power through Jesus on countless occasions before?
- **do they not have faith....?**

(22) "Have faith in God," Jesus answered.

- That lack of faith is precisely the problem!
- and there is the implication of a **rebuke**, a wee telling off, in Jesus having to tell his disciples to have faith!!

(23) "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.

- Jesus is saying, in effect:
 - **what's the big deal with a fig tree? Given faith, you could move mountains!**
 - *(the phrase about the mountain was a common one amongst rabbinical teachers at the time)*
- The need for faith in prayer is a constant point in Jesus' teaching about prayer:
 - because **faith** is the basic condition of **all** our relationship with God; for instance:
 - *(Heb 11:6) without faith it is impossible to please God*
 - if we don't have faith, we don't have a relationship with God, and if we don't have that we can't be communicating with him!!
- **What, then, is faith?**
- *A complete trusting of ourselves to God; to his way of dealing with us, to his way of working in the world; to his Lordship, his wisdom, his right to act in ways beyond us...*
- **Those who have faith are earnestly yearning for and entering into the will of God**
 - they have entrusted themselves to him, and are saying in prayer - **I want what you want!**
 - the words they are using may be, "Will you heal Jimmy" or "Lord, please use the Holiday Club to reach many children in the parish", or any of a million other things....
- But what they are doing, at the deepest level, is saying: **"I want what you want!"**
 - those with faith want to **lean on God**, and their prayer is that desire expressed

(24) Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

- That aligning of the will with God's will is what opens the key to really grasping what this passage is - **and is not** - saying!
 - **its not saying simply that if we ask hard enough or often enough something will happen**
 - its not saying that every time we pray a visible miracle will happen
 - **its not even as simple as saying that if we pray for something and it is good it will happen**
- **For that good may not be God's best.**
 - *(Isaiah 55:8) "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD*
 - and so sometimes God permits to happen that which to our eyes seems awful;
 - even when we have prayed for the opposite.
- **This is painful and hard** - for who here hasn't prayed for relief and healing for someone to whom that relief and healing has not come, or for success in some Christian venture that would have (to our eyes) been of great blessing - and seen that prayer fall on stony ground?
- I don't think explanation helps too much here - only a reminder of what Jesus himself went through in **Gethsemane 2 days later!**
 - *(Mark 14:36) "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me."*
 - Jesus prayed that the awfulness of the Cross would not happen;

- and God did not listen to him
- yet through his death everyone who believes has life, every lost soul is found, more good was done in those few hours of Crucifixion than has been wrought in the rest of history put together!!
- For the verse I quoted doesn't finish where I stopped:
 - (Mark 14:36) "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."
 - "yet not what I will, but what you will!"
 - there is the key!
- So, when we pray and it doesn't come to pass:
 - Jesus knows how it feels!
 - his example is of one who consciously entrusted himself, in prayer, into God's purpose - painful though that was!
 - and we need to grow in faith, in our trust in God's goodness and the wisdom of his purposes; to learn the humility that admits that we don't know why something has happened...
- That can be very hard - and isn't the end of the story, a neat answer to an intellectual puzzle:
 - how could you respond to the parents of Holly Wells or Jessica Chapman or Milly Dowler when they ask why their prayers were not answered? Because God's will was that they die? NO!!
 - yet we seek to follow Jesus' example, and consciously, as an act of the will, give ourselves in trust to God: "yet not what I will, but what you will!" - to grapple with our desires until they are aligned with God, and we hold onto nothing ourselves (deny self, take up cross!)

(25) And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

- Last verse in the passage has another "condition" of prayer:
 - need for us to forgive;
- Its a corollary of the earlier call to have faith.
 - for if we won't forgive then we cannot be conscious of the grace we ourselves need and have received
 - and if not conscious of that grace, then we are operating as if we are heard in prayer on the basis of our own merits, our own goodness - and that certainly isn't true!
- Prayer is about hearing God's will and saying "Lord, make that come to be"; yearning with every fibre of our being that God's will be done.
 - if we are out of relationship with God, we are barking up the wrong tree and it'll be harder to hear God's voice...

Let us pray...

- In light of what we've thought about tonight, I suspect the problem we have with the verse we started with:
 - "whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours"
 is our problem, and not God's!!
- We think about prayer as a request and not a relationship, as asking for our will to be done and not as aligning ourselves to God's will.
- Let's grapple with God in prayer, and seek in prayer to align ourselves with his will.