

St. Matthew A.M.E. Church
Holy Week Bible Study
Tuesday, April 07, 2009

St. Matthew 21:18-32

Religion Without Fruit

As we discussed in last night's Bible Study Jesus did not spend any nights in Jerusalem prior to His arrest on Thursday night. Early every morning He came back into the city from the Mount of Olives to teach in the temple. In tonight's text Jesus comes back to Jerusalem on Tuesday morning and He is hungry. Notice the humanity of the Son of God. Like us He gets hungry. As He journeys toward the temple He sees a fig tree. He comes up to it and finds nothing on it but leaves. Jesus speaks to the tree and says to it, "let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. In Luke 13:6-9 Jesus speaks of a fig tree that was not producing fruit and the owner was going to cut it down. He said, "for three years I have been coming to look for fruit on this tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil." One of the servants pleaded for Him to give it one more year and to let Him dig around it and fertilize it. "If it bears fruit next year fine! If not, then cut it down." The fruitless fig tree represented the barren religion of Israel.

Likewise in Matthew 21 Jesus found the religion of Israel to be barren. It's leaders have turned the "House of Prayer" into a "den of thieves" Jesus has been rejected as king, and the time for judgment has come. Jesus said to the tree "may you never bear fruit again" and the fig tree withered. The cursing of the fig tree is a powerful symbolic action. It is meant to send a warning to us about how God views anyone whose life does not bear spiritual fruit. This fig tree bore leaves which would lead someone to believe that it has fruit, but this tree had no fruit at all. This is misleading. It is the same as those who make a verbal profession of discipleship, who call, "Lord, Lord and who do not do as I say." (Luke 6:46) They bear all the outward signs of discipleship but do not possess "the fruit of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23)

The Challenge of Jesus Authority

Then Jesus comes to the temple. In the temple He is confronted by the chief priest and the elders of the people who demanded of Him, "by what authority are you doing these things?" "And who gave you this authority?" In Mark's gospel the list is expanded to include "the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders." (Mark 11:27) These three groups make up the Sanhedrin Council, so this was probably an official delegation, and they wanted to make clear that they were the authorities and they had not authorized His teaching. Since they confronted Him with a question, Jesus responded with a question. They asked Him about His authority; so He asked them about their authority. He asked, "John's baptism- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" This stunned and baffled them. It caught them off guard. First, Jesus like John the Baptist did not study in their rabbinical schools or been endorsed by the Jerusalem authorities, but both had been accepted by the people. More importantly, John had testified that Jesus was the Christ, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and the "Son of God" (John 1:34). If they admitted that John's ministry was from God they would have to admit to the authority of Jesus for their source was the same. But if they said "from men" they would be afraid of the people for they counted John as a prophet. (verse 25-26) The religious leaders were in a bind with no way out so they said, "we don't know." And Jesus responded, "neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." (verse 27)*

In Matthew's gospel the matter of authority is important. When Jesus began His public ministry we are told that "the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." (St. Matthew 7:28-29) In tonight's lesson the word authority is found four times, twice from Jesus and twice from His accusers. This encounter between Jesus and His accusers unmask their hypocrisy and makes them look weak, causing them to become even more determined to get rid of Him.