



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Twenty One

Summary of Chapter Twenty One

The Triumphal Entry. Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the final time before his crucifixion to a rapturous reception from the ordinary people, who perceived that their Messiah had come to restore the Kingdom to Israel. Although he was a king, Jesus rode into the city on the colt of a donkey in order to fulfil the Scripture that had foretold he would do so.

Jesus visited his Father's house, the temple in Jerusalem, and was angered to find it being used as a market place. He immediately cleared the whole area, driving out those engaged in commerce, who were exchanging money, selling livestock and various other items required for the temple sacrificial system.

On his way into the city the next morning, Jesus cursed a fig tree which was in full leaf but bore no fruit. The purpose of this was to illustrate to his disciples the need for them to bear Kingdom fruit no matter what the season.

While he was healing and teaching in the temple complex, the chief priests and scribes challenged Jesus as to what authority he had. He replied with a question over the authority of John the Baptist - was it human or divine? They refused to answer as either response would cause them problems with the people, so Jesus also refused to answer their question.

Jesus then told the Parable of the Two Sons. One is instructed to do some work for his father. Initially he refuses but then complies with the instruction. The second agreed to do his father's will but subsequently did not do it. Jesus' point is that what is important is doing the Father's will, even if his instructions are not obeyed immediately.

The chapter concludes with the Parable of the Tenants, relating to the Jewish leadership, who were charged with working the landowner's vineyard, paying him his due from the crop that was produced. When the landowner, God the Father, sent his representatives the prophets, to the tenants, they refused to pay their dues, abusing and even killing the servants sent to collect the owner's payment. As a final resort the owner sent his only Son, his Christ, but he too was not accepted, was expelled from the vineyard and killed, so that the tenants could claim the vineyard for themselves. Jesus warned that their

action would result in the loss of the vineyard that would then be given to other tenants, the Gentiles, who would bear fruit for the landowner.

XII. Matthew 21:1-23:39 - The Messiah Asserts His Authority over Jerusalem

Jesus' authority over Jerusalem is revealed in his triumphal entry, his actions in the temple, the cursing of the fig tree, debates held with religious leaders, and woes pronounced on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

XII.a Matthew 21:1-11 - Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

As he entered Jerusalem publically for the final time before his death, Jesus is acclaimed as the Messiah; yet he entered in all humility, riding on the colt of a donkey. Jesus would no doubt have arranged his arrival in this way to ensure the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy for he was both fully conversant with the Scripture and his heritage as a descendant of King David.

More importantly, this narrative both portrays Jesus as a king and defines the significance of his kingship. Because his kingship was so different from worldly models of authority, Jesus subverts the worldly understanding of kingship to suggest a reign of a different order.

¹ When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

Matthew 21:1

Jerusalem is the city of the Great King: <<*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King*>> (Psalm 48:1-2), the centre of Israel's religious life and messianic expectations.

When they had come near to Jerusalem. Passover was held on Nisan 14, which was a Thursday that year. Jesus had spent the previous Sabbath with friends: <<*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead*>> (John 12:1), before entering Jerusalem on Sunday Nisan 10: <<*The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem*>> (John 12:12). Nisan 10 was the day that the Paschal lamb was to be taken in: <<*Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household*>> (Exodus 12:3). Jesus was to be God's ultimate Paschal lamb, the final Passover sacrifice.

Bethphage, which in Hebrew means 'house of unripe figs', is traditionally located less than a mile east of Jerusalem on the southeast slope of **the Mount of Olives**, which rises 2,660 feet or 811m above sea level and lies to the east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley, providing a spectacular view of the Temple Mount. It was considered to be the



Bethphage as it is today

on the outer limits of the city and the furthest point at which bread could be baked for the temple.

Jesus and his disciples often crossed over the Kidron brook to stay on Olivet, the location of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus would pray to his Father for the last time before being arrested, or to travel to the village of Bethany.



The Mount of Olives

² saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

Matthew 21:2

You will find a donkey. Matthew abbreviates the account that is given greater depth of discussion in Mark 11:1-7. The key points alluded to here are Jesus’ foreknowledge that the donkey and a colt with her would be in the village ahead, as well the authority and respect shown to Jesus to let his disciples simply take the two animals for his use (v.3).

There would be a similar demonstration of Jesus’ foreknowledge later in the week when he would send two of his disciples to locate the room for the Passover meal: <<‘Listen,’ he said to them, ‘when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters’>> (Luke 22:10).

³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’

Matthew 21:3

Jesus plainly refers to himself as the Lord, the sovereign orchestrator of these events. Matthew is making a statement not so much about possessions here as about Christ; as the rightful King he has the right to anything in all creation, certainly from among his own people.

⁴ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ ‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

Matthew 21:4-5

This took place to fulfil. Matthew specifies that Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem upon a donkey’s colt fulfils the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Matthew like John: <<Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!>> (John 12:15), recognised the significance of Zechariah 9:9, which was apparently a little known and much misunderstood text in Jesus’ day.
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

Matthew21-3

Therefore, Mark and Luke do not explicitly refer to the prophecy in their telling of Jesus' arrival on a donkey.

Jesus' action is an open declaration that he is the righteous Davidic Messiah, for the prophecy says your king is coming to you. Matthew could also be alluding to: <<Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk>> (Genesis 49:8-12), where Jacob prophesied about a kingly descendant of his son Judah, whose rule will extend to the nations. The first line of the OT quotation, however, is from: <<The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'>> (Isaiah 62:11), and uses the phrase daughter of Zion to refer to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Tell the daughter of Zion refers to the people of Israel generally and more specifically to the inhabitants of Jerusalem here. Mount Zion was the location of Jerusalem but had become synonymous with the whole Jewish nation. Later in Scripture it will be used to describe the church: <<But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering>> (Hebrews 12:22). The Christ was always intended to be its king: <<I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill>> (Psalm 2:6), whom, it was acknowledged, would have to be a Hebrew: <<you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community>> (Deuteronomy 17:15).

Look, your king is coming to you. There is a similar phrase used by Pilate in far different circumstances less than a week later: <<Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!">> (John 19:14 ESV). No longer coming to them but being sent from them because of their rejection of him: <<So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him>> (v.39).

Humble, and mounted on a donkey. Jesus was demonstrating that he was not the warrior king that people had expected in the Messiah. He did not ride in on a horse as a king of old might have, yet he did arrive as a judge would. When Abdon was judge of Israel: <<He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys; he judged Israel for eight years>> (Judges 12:14). Jesus was both a king and a judge: <<Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'>> (John 9:39). He would also be acknowledged as a prophet (v.11), and the Son of God: <<Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'>> (Mark 15:39).

Jesus was the humble servant: <<Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations>> (Isaiah 42:1), who would bring salvation to all of mankind.

And on a colt. In Zechariah it is an example of Hebrew poetic parallelism, where an idea is stated twice in successive lines using slightly different wording.

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

Matthew 21:6-7

The donkey and the colt. Matthew alone mentions two animals, which Zechariah's prophecy allows. Having the mother donkey move alongside her unbroken colt would be the best way to calm it during the noisy entrance into Jerusalem. Jesus even showed care for this lowly donkey, as his Father had done for Balaam's companion: <<*Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'*>> (Numbers 22:28).

And he sat on them. Them refers to the cloaks, which is the closest antecedent in the Greek, and not to the two animals, i.e. he only sat on the colt.

⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Matthew 21:8

Spread their cloaks on the road symbolised the crowd's submission to Jesus as their king, following an ancient tradition: <<*Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, 'Jehu is king'*>> (2 Kings 9:13).

Palm branches symbolised Jewish nationalism and victory: <<*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'*>> (John 12:13). They were connected with prominent Jewish victories: <<*On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel*>> (1 Maccabees 13:51), and with the Festival of Tabernacles; palm motifs were common on both Jewish coinage and synagogue decoration.

⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Matthew 21:9

The crowds that went ahead of him were customary when going out to greet the king, reminiscent of the days of Solomon: <<*Daughters of Jerusalem come out. Look, O daughters of Zion, at King Solomon, at the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart*>> (Song 3:10d-11).

Hosanna is the Hebrew word meaning ‘O save’ or simply help: <<*When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance, and said, ‘Help, O king!’*>> (2 Samuel 14:4).

Son of David. The crowd acknowledged that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah. However, like his disciples and indeed modern day Christians, the people did not fully understand the real character of his lordship or his demands on their lives. Refer to comments made on Matthew 9:27 for more on the Davidic kingship link.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord was the typical blessing offered to pilgrims arriving for the Passover. It is taken from: <<*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord*>> (Psalm 118:26). Refer also to v.42.

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’

Matthew 21:10

The whole city. Just as all Jerusalem was troubled at the news from the Magi of the new King of the Jews being born: <<*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him*>> (Matthew 2:3), so here the religious establishment is once again in turmoil, fearing that Jesus may usurp their power.

Who is this? It is not clear if this was spoken by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as many commentators propose, who had not seen so much of Jesus’ work or heard his teaching in the way the Galilæans had, or if it was the visiting Jews who had come for the Passover. There would be plenty who would answer them. Their question is unsurprising since: <<*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*>> (John 1:11).

¹¹ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Matthew 21:11

This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. Although Moses had predicted the coming of a prophet like himself to whom the people should listen, refer to Deuteronomy 18:15-18, there is no indication that the crowds here in Jerusalem recognised Jesus as that particular prophet.

The Jewish leaders had claimed that no prophet would arise from that region: <<*They replied, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee’*>> (John 7:52), which was not true for Jonah was from that region: <<*He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher*>> (2 Kings 14:25), where Gath-hepher was located in the land allocated to the tribe of Zebulun, which later became Galilee: <<*from there it passes along on the east towards the sunrise to Gath-hepher, to Eth-kazin, and going on to Rimmon it bends towards Neah*>> (Joshua 10:13). However, although Jesus grew up in Galilee, he had been born in Bethlehem: <<*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing*

that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger>> (Luke 2:15-16), just as it had been foretold: <<But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days>> (Micah 5:2).

XII.b Matthew 21:12-17 - Jesus Cleanses the Temple

John’s Gospel records a similar cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: *<<The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’>> (John 2:13-17).*

Interpreters have proposed two explanations:

1. There was only one cleansing, but John narrated the action at the beginning for thematic/theological purposes, while the Synoptic Gospels narrate the actual historical chronology.
2. There were indeed two similar but distinctly different temple cleansings.

The differences of detail seem to indicate the latter, for while the initial action is similar, Jesus’ statement (v.13), and the challenge from the Jewish leaders (vv.15-16), are entirely different from what John records. In addition, John places the event so early in his Gospel that it would be difficult to think he wanted readers to take it as anything but an event that happened early in Jesus’ ministry. Thus Jesus cleansed the temple at the beginning as a warning, and at the end of his ministry as a statement of judgment on the leadership of Israel.

Mark deals with this and the next section (vv.18-22) together and in more depth. Refer to Mark 11:12-26 and the comments made on that section.

¹² Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

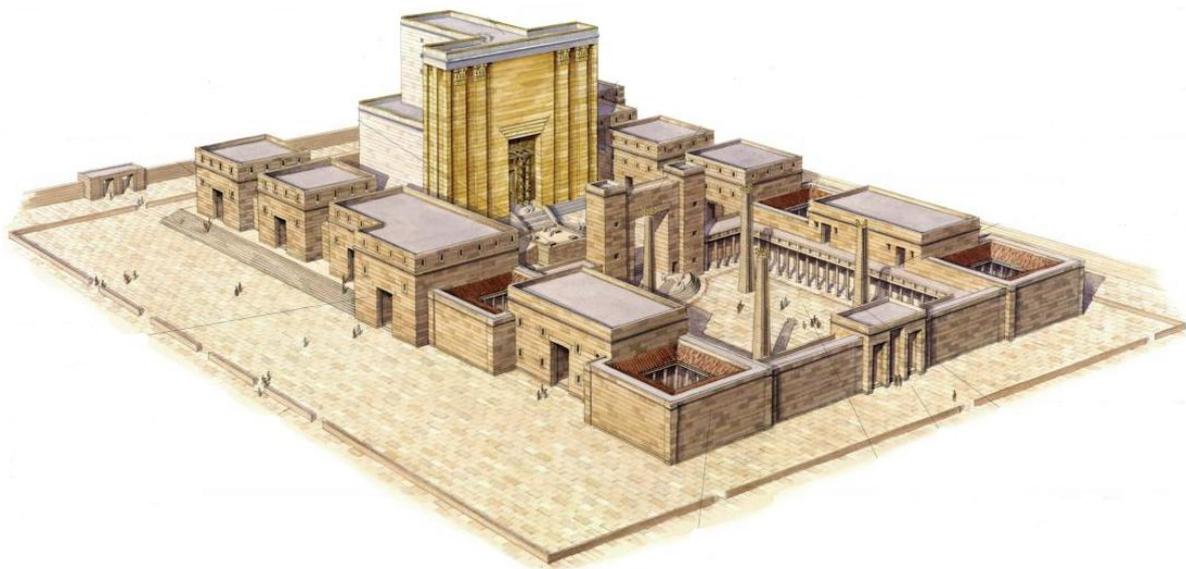
Matthew 21:12

Then Jesus entered the temple might seem to suggest that this cleansing of the temple took place immediately after Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Sunday (vv.1-11), but Mark clearly places the incident on Monday morning: *<<On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it. Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple>> (Mark 11:12-16).* At times Matthew condenses

some of the narrative of Jesus' activities during Holy Week and arranges it topically, which is the case here. Once Matthew tells readers that Jesus entered Jerusalem (vv.1-11), he recounts what else Jesus did in Jerusalem (vv.12-17), without specifying that it was the next day.

Drove out all. It is generally accepted that this activity was taking place in the court of the Gentiles, the only place where non-Jews could come to worship and thus the commercial trade was impeding them from coming before God in his house. Later reports claim that the front court of the temple was normally to be kept clear as a sacred area, but the many temporary shops for selling animals inside would have violated this custom even if they took up but a small part of the temple area. The Great Redeemer had come as the Great Reformer: *<<And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'>>* (Romans 11:26).

The temple was always intended to be a place for all people: *<<Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built>>* (1 Kings 8:41-43). However, by Jesus' day in the new Herodian Temple, signs had gone up restricting parts of the outer court for Jewish use only, limiting further the opportunities for Gentiles. In fact, there was an inscription in both Latin and Greek that stated: 'It is a capital offence for strangers to enter' (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities).



Herod's Temple Complex

All who were selling and buying. Within the temple there was a sort of market where commercial activity enabled pilgrims from throughout the Diaspora to participate in temple activities, and to exchange their own currency for temple currency. Jesus had not required such a service: *<<When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?' He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From*

whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others', Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me'>> (Matthew 17:24-27), which refers to the requirements of the law: <<The Lord spoke to Moses: When you take a census of the Israelites to register them, at registration all of them shall give a ransom for their lives to the Lord, so that no plague may come upon them for being registered. This is what each one who is registered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. Each one who is registered, from twenty years old and upwards, shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half-shekel, when you bring this offering to the Lord to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the Israelites and shall designate it for the service of the tent of meeting; before the Lord it will be a reminder to the Israelites of the ransom given for your lives>> (Exodus 30:11-16). They would also purchase animals and other items for sacrifices from the temple traders. Their activities were legal and indeed helped people in their duty toward God. It was the way people had gone about this business that had so incensed Jesus, for they had lost sight of its purpose. Jesus saw no point in arguing, just doing what was required: <<and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain>> (1 Timothy 6:5).

Since Jesus was opposing both buyers and sellers, he was not opposing corrupt business practices or anyone making excessive profits. He was opposing the whole concept of moral and spiritual corruption that the activities represented in terms of it taking place in the Temple courts.

It was prophesied that the Lord would come to reclaim his temple: <<See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years>> (Malachi 3:1-4)

The Dispersion, Greek *diaspora*, was a common Jewish expression to refer to all the Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and even beyond the boundaries of the empire, those not living in Palestine itself.

He overturned the tables of the money-changers yet he did not take their money, letting the coins be scattered to the ground: <<He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables>> (John 2:15b). He did not want the spoil from his victorious actions: <<but they did not touch the plunder>> (Esther 9:10b). After Abraham's return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer, he declined to take a share of the spoil as well: <<But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, "I have made Abram rich">> (Genesis 14:22-23).

¹³ He said to them, ‘It is written,
“My house shall be called a house of prayer”;
but you are making it a den of robbers.’

Matthew 21:13

It is written. So that no one could be in doubt of Jesus’ right to do these things he calls on the authority of the Scriptures. Refer to v.23.

My house shall be called a house of prayer is a quote from Isaiah 56:7. Isaiah, like Solomon, foresaw that the temple was to become a place for all nations to come before God and not just exclusively for the Jewish people: <<*In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it*>> (Isaiah 2:2).

Jesus compared the temple and its keepers to a den of robbers. The Jews would have known these to be the words of the prophet: <<*Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 7:11), and its allusion to their use of the temple for commerce. Thieves often used caves to store their ill-gotten wealth and to plot future crimes, the worst being perpetrated against God in his own house: <<*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings!*>> (Malachi 3:8).

Jeremiah’s prophecy was an indication of God’s judgement to come on the Jews because they profaned his temple, which led to its destruction by the Babylonians. Jesus used it again here and within a generation the people were dispersed once more when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD70, which many saw as judgement on the religious leadership for their rejection of Jesus, and their part in having him condemned to die.

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.

Matthew 21:14

He cured them. Healing the blind and the lame in the temple did not constitute the type of activities that so offended Jesus and therefore his Father, for they were undertaken in love and compassion, advancing his Messianic claims at the same time.

The Jewish leadership would have found Jesus’ actions outrageous for the temple was supposed to be only for those who were ceremonially clean. Jews considered any disability to be an affliction of God thus rendering a person unclean, barring them from entering God’s presence in the temple: <<*David had said on that day, ‘Whoever wishes to strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.’ Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house’*>> (2 Samuel 5:8). Jesus showed that his Church was to be one of acceptance and inclusion no matter what a person was or did.

¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna

to the Son of David', they became angry ¹⁶ and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,

"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?"

Matthew 21:15-16

The chief priests and the scribes were not the High Priest but senior figures from the Sanhedrin and their entourage. Jesus was now confronting the most senior and powerful leaders in the country, who far out ranked the Pharisees with whom he had so far found in opposition to him. These men would find his work in the temple as sedition and his opposition to them as a political act of aggression. This, along with his claims to be God's son that they viewed as blasphemous, would ultimately lead to them sentencing him to death.

Hosanna to the Son of David. Jesus acknowledged the children's praise and linked it to: <<*Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger*>> (Psalm 8:2 NIV), which the religious leaders should have known applied such praise to God, thus confirming Jesus as the divine Messiah.

Out of the mouths of infants. Jesus not only accepted the praise from this socially insignificant group he quoted the Davidic Psalm 8:2 to men raised up on the Scriptures, thus saying that if the children should praise Jesus as Lord, how much more should those who profess to represent God?

¹⁷ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Matthew 21:17

Went out of the city to Bethany, which was a village about 2 miles or 3.2 km from Jerusalem on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Perhaps Jesus spent the night at the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, with whom he had close association: <<*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her*



Modern day Bethany or El-Azariyeh

home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her'>> (Luke 10:38-42), and: <<*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of*

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Matthew 21-11

pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume>> (John 12:1-3). Indeed, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, which is recounted in John 11:1-44.

XII.c Matthew 21:18-22 - Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

Matthew discusses the cursing of the fig tree and the disciples' reaction together, treating the events topically just as he did the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple. Mark gives the probable chronological order, while Matthew gives a literary compression of the account. Thus the tree was cursed most likely on Monday morning on the way into the city, and on Tuesday morning the disciples react to the withering on their way back to Jerusalem: *<<On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it>> (Mark 11:12-14), and: <<In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses'>> (Mark 11:20-25).*

¹⁸ In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once.

Matthew 21:18-19

In the morning, when he returned to the city. Jesus knew what fate awaited him in Jerusalem but was bound by the Spirit of God to continue to go there to fulfil his Father's will. Paul had a similar calling, but without the full knowledge of his future: *<<And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there>> (Acts 20:22).*

He was hungry is a statement that shows Jesus full humanity and is similar to other statements about him, which could be true of his human nature only and not of his divine nature. Other statements include: *<<And the child grew and became strong>> (Luke 2:40a), <<grew in wisdom and stature>> (Luke 2:52a), <<was about thirty years old>> (Luke 3:23a), <<tired as he was>> (John 4:6b), <<Jesus began to weep>> (John 11:35), <<I am thirsty>> (John 19:28b), and: <<crucified>> (1 Corinthians 2:8). However, his true hunger was to see real and lasting fruit from those who professed to follow him: *<<You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name>> (John 15:16).**

Found nothing at all on it but leaves. Since the fruit of the fig tree begins to appear about the same time as the leaves, or a little thereafter, the appearance of

leaves in full bloom should have indicated that fruit in the form of green figs was already growing. Jesus' actions here have symbolic importance, signifying the hypocrisy of all who have the appearance that they are bearing fruit but in fact are not: <<*Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. Ephraim's glory shall fly away like a bird – no birth, no pregnancy, no conception! Even if they bring up children, I will bereave them until no one is left. Woe to them indeed when I depart from them! Once I saw Ephraim as a young palm planted in a lovely meadow, but now Ephraim must lead out his children for slaughter. Give them, O Lord – what will you give? Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts. Every evil of theirs began at Gilgal; there I came to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more; all their officials are rebels. Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will kill the cherished offspring of their womb. Because they have not listened to him, my God will reject them; they shall become wanderers among the nations*>> (Hosea 9:10-17).

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover so it was late March or early April and fig trees on the eastern slopes of Olivet would have been in full leaf but the ripe fruits would not have been ready for eating until June. This was made explicit by Mark: <<*Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs*>> (Mark 11:13). Jesus was symbolising the judgement that would come upon the religious leadership who were found to be 'out of season'. The same would apply to church leaders today, and indeed hypocritical disciples.

May no fruit ever come from you again! Jesus was condemning such leaders and even disciples to become barren in their work, i.e. the fig tree withered at once. Jesus had previously shown his authority to heal diseases, drive out demons and control nature. Here he was demonstrating his authority to judge and condemn.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' ²¹ Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. ²² Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

Matthew 21:20-22

How did the fig tree wither at once? As already noted from Mark, it was the following morning before Peter noticed the fig had died. This does not mean that it had not withered immediately Jesus cursed it. Anyway, the main point is that it would never bear fruit again.

If you have faith, say to this mountain. Jesus had returned to teaching on the need for his disciples to live and work by faith in order to achieve the seemingly impossible. Given the surrounding context of conflict, Jesus' model of faith includes facing death bravely in obedience to God's call and trusting his power over death itself. Refer to comments made on Matthew 17:19-20.

Although the whole concept of moving a mountain is metaphorical it appears that it may become a reality at the time of Christ's Second Coming: <<On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that half of the Mount shall withdraw northwards, and the other half southwards>> (Zechariah 14:4). The Second Coming itself will certainly be a reality for it is a promise of God and in faith disciples should not waver: <<No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God>> (Romans 4:20).

XII.d Matthew 21:23-22:46 - Controversies in the temple court over Jesus' authority

On Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus presented three extended parables showing God's judgment on the leaders for not encouraging the people to accept Jesus' invitation to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 21:28-22:14). This is followed by a series of four interactions as the religious leaders try to trap Jesus, who in turn revealed his true identity as the Son of God (Matthew 22:15-46).

XII.d.i Matthew 21:23-27 - The Authority of Jesus Questioned

Despite being recognised by many as a great teacher, Jesus had never been trained in a rabbinic school nor was he recognised as being part of the religious establishment. Therefore, Jesus was challenged by the chief priests to demonstrate by whose authority he was teaching and performing such great miracles. Instead of giving them a direct answer, he posed a question concerning John the Baptist's authority, i.e. was it from heaven or from men. This placed a dilemma on the priests who refused to give a straight answer. Therefore, Jesus too refused to answer their questions.

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

Matthew 21:23

By what authority are you doing these things most likely refers to Jesus' disrupting of the commercial activities of the temple the previous day (vv.12-13), and also to his authority to heal unclean people in the temple courts (vv.14-16), and to teach in the temple area (v.23), because he had neither official priestly authority nor was he a scribe.

The Jews had sought the authority of others, such as the Hebrew slave caught fighting by Moses: <<He answered, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known'>> (Exodus 2:14), and of Peter and John when they appeared before the Sanhedrin: <<When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'>> (Acts 4:7).

²⁴ Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From

heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”²⁶ But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’²⁷ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Matthew 21:24-27

Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? The leaders’ refusal to answer this question shows their dishonesty, but Jesus also trapped them, for as religious leaders they must now profess their ignorance. And if they did not know whether John was from God, how could they possibly judge whether Jesus is?

We are afraid of the crowd. This is the first of two such admissions by the leaders of the people. They feared not so much for their personal safety but for their social status for they needed the support of the people in order to retain what authority the Romans allowed them. If the people opposed them, or worse still rioted, the Romans would have assumed full control of all matters. This made the leaders contemptible, fulfilling prophecy about them: *<<But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction>>* (Malachi 2:8-9). In fact, they were in such a base position that they answered foolishly to the one question that Jesus had posed by saying we do not know.

For all regard John as a prophet. The people were renowned for their integrity in divine matters. They may have feared the authority of their leaders: *<<His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue>>* (John 9:22), but they would have rebelled against them if they had interfered in their beliefs about John. Had the leaders shown the same integrity they would have answered Jesus. Had they believed that John was from heaven, something that should have been obvious to such learned men, they would have repented and then followed Jesus when he arrived. Their own personal desire for wealth and status had blinded them to that option.

Solomon taught on the folly of fear and the wisdom of trusting in God: <<The fear of others lays a snare, but one who trusts in the Lord is secure>> (Proverbs 29:25). These men had laid a trap for Jesus in their demands over his authority, yet the trap had closed on them. Ultimately, they would pay the price: *<<For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them>>* (Romans 1:18-19); although nowhere near the price paid by Jesus for them.

XII.d.ii Matthew 21:28-32 - The Parable of the Two Sons

This account tells of two sons. One initially refused to do what his father asked but then had a change of heart and did what he should have done initially. The second said he would comply with his father’s wishes but did not.

The parable's point is obvious enough in Matthew's context - the repentant son did the father's will; the unrepentant son was unfruitful, claiming to do but not doing. Thus the latter stands for Israel's religious leaders, in contrast to the humble who heeded both John the Baptist and Jesus.

²⁸ 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."²⁹ He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Matthew 21:28-32

A man had two sons. Jesus clearly shows that both those who will enter the Kingdom and those destined for hell share the same Father. This is a poignant fact that should never be forgotten, for it is God: <<*who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*>> (1 Timothy 2:4). It is mankind generally who chooses not to accept the free grace on offer.

The parable of the two sons demonstrates the religious leaders' failure to respond rightly to John the Baptist's prophetic ministry. They hypocritically did not live up to their talk, something Jesus would again warn his disciples and the general public about: <<*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach*>> (Matthew 23:2-3). The fruit of one's life ultimately proves whether or not one is obedient to God's message; leaves, buds and blossom are not fruit. A person's actions ultimately prove whether or not he is obedient to God.

The tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. Jesus did not exonerate the first son nor does he state that those who do repent are good. They are simply not as bad as those who choose not to repent and God is so gracious that he bestows mercy on the repentant, allowing them into his Kingdom of Righteousness.

The religious leaders to whom Jesus spoke saw themselves as the elite in society, with the tax collectors and the prostitutes at the other end of the scale: <<*So the last will be first, and the first will be last*>> (Matthew 20:16), for they had discovered the narrow gate into the Kingdom of God. God had promised to accept those who genuinely repented of their sins: <<*But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die*>> (Ezekiel 18:21), which is just as well: <<*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works*

of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit>> (Titus 3:3-5).

The interpretation of this parable follows naturally after vv.23-27. Jesus and John represent the same source of moral authority, and those who rejected John's way of righteousness showed the hypocrisy of their own claims to be God's servants. The repentance of the more openly sinful people did not provoke them to jealousy for their own spiritual status in the way that it did Paul: *<<Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them>> (Romans 11:13-14).*

Just as Jesus taught his disciples in parables, he challenges his opponents in like manner. Reproving parables are appeals to the offenders themselves, and judge them with their own words and actions.

XII.d.iii Matthew 21:33-46 - The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants continues the vineyard metaphor to show that God is taking away the Kingdom from many in Israel and giving it to the Gentiles who accept the call and produce the Kingdom fruit that God desires.

³³ 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

Matthew 21:33

Listen to another parable. Jesus seemed to want his hearers, both disciples and the religious leaders, to pay particular attention to what he was about to say.

There was a landowner. It was quite common for wealthy men to own large areas of land and sublet it to tenant farmers, taking payment either in gold or silver, or by having a share of the harvest. This was a perfectly legal arrangement although it was ordained by God that it was to be undertaken fairly by both parties involved: *<<If you sell land to any of your own people or buy land from them, do not take advantage of each other. You are to buy from your own people on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And they are to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what is really being sold to you is the number of crops. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God>> (Leviticus 25:14-17),* for the land was to be restored to its original owner in the year of Jubilee, i.e. every fifty years.

Put a fence around it. This was standard practice to protect the vineyard from scavenging animals or thieves: *<<Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it>> (Psalm 80:12-13).* God protects both the Jewish and the Christian church in this way and was accused by Satan of doing the same for Job: *<<Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land>> (Job 1:10).*

Built a watch-tower. Such a tower was often a hut of leaf-covered wood or possibly of stone which served both as a look-out and as a shelter for the vinedressers at harvest time: <<*He built towers in the wilderness and hewed out many cisterns, for he had large herds, both in the Shephelah and in the plain, and he had farmers and vine-dressers in the hills and in the fertile lands, for he loved the soil*>> (2 Chronicles 26:10).

He leased it to tenants. Since the **vineyard** normally refers to the nation of Israel then the **tenants** who were left in charge clearly refers to the religious leaders rather than the ordinary people. Neither Jesus nor Matthew contends for God's rejection of Israel as a people, but for his rejection of the religious leaders. Israel was unprepared for its Master because Israel's leaders failed in their stewardship to acknowledge the true Lord.

There is a proverbial saying: 'while the cat's away the mice will play', i.e. the **landowner went to another country.** This perhaps alludes to God not speaking to his people through prophets for about 400 years from Malachi until John the Baptist and Jesus, although he always expects his people to be able to act independently within his will for them.

³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son."

Matthew 21:34-37

When the harvest time had come. Harvest time would either have allowed the tenants to give the required amount of crops agreed for rent to the landowner's representatives; or sell the crops and make the rental payment in cash.

If Solomon's terms were standard, and ancient tradition tends to support that owners took the lion's share: <<*Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, my very own, is for myself; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred!*>> (Song 8:10-11), which shows Solomon receiving 1,000 pieces of silver and the tenants 200 for their labour, indicating just how benevolent God is in only requiring a tenth, especially as everything belongs to him anyway.

God has borne the cost of creation and the crucifixion of his Son, requiring no deposit from anyone, in order to allow us to work in his vineyard. It seems only right that he should expect and receive some of the fruit. Many might argue that he deserves all of it.

Beat, killed, stoned. The treatment of **his slaves** brings to mind what God's prophets had experienced throughout OT history: <<*when Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets, hid them fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water*>> (1 Kings 18:4), and: <<*Now the priest Pashhur son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashhur struck the prophet Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 20:1-2).

Even had hearers not recognised the image of God and his prophets here, no one would expect the benevolent landowner to remain benevolent indefinitely;
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Matthew 21-18

indeed, some landlords even had their own hit squads to take out troublesome tenant farmers. Everyone also knew that the state would always side with the landlord, even if he was a bad one; in a case of obvious wrongdoing like this one, the murderers of his servants would be executed or enslaved.

The religious leaders would know the Scriptures that Jesus was alluding to, including God having no option but to send Judah into exile: *<<but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy>>* (2 Chronicles 36:16), and Israelite history, for they had beaten Jeremiah, killed Isaiah, and stoned Zechariah the son of Jehoiada in the temple. The priests and scribes would have known that Jesus was talking against the establishment.

He sent his son to them is an unmistakable allusion to the Father sending his own Son Jesus. The parable publicly declares Jesus' divine Sonship.

They will respect my son. God, of course, always knew what the outcome would be for his Christ. He came as the atoning sacrifice and he knew he would never be accepted by the majority, then or now! However, the parable clearly alludes to this being the ultimate crime against the landowner, for they knew he was the heir (v.38). Men like Herod and Pilate might make the excuse they did not truly understand who Jesus was: *<<None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory>>* (1 Corinthians 2:8), or would they have done so anyway?

³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Matthew 21:38-39

Let us kill him and get his inheritance. Normally, such a landowner would take the appropriate action against the tenants. Quite in contrast to expectations, however, the landowner acts with such benevolence that ancient hearers could have regarded his action merely as utter folly, for he believes that the murderous tenants will at least respect his son as his own representative; the heir to his estate. Jesus tells them about the death of the landowner's son, the tenants' ultimate act of treachery.

Threw him out of the vineyard: *<<Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha>>* (John 19:16-17), and killed him. His disciples are of course called to follow Jesus: *<<Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured>>* (Hebrews 13:13).

⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' ⁴¹ They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Matthew 21:40-41

When the owner of the vineyard comes alludes to Christ's Second Coming. Even God's patience will eventually come to an end. As benevolent as the landowner is,

no one will be surprised that he finally takes appropriate and righteous judgemental action. No law would have actually granted the vineyard to tenants who had murdered the owner's son.

As if asking for a legal ruling, Jesus questioned the religious leaders as to what this patient landowner will finally do to the murderers. The answer is obvious. The evil tenant farmers, no match for the landlord's power, were utter fools to doubt that they would die, i.e. he will put those wretches to a miserable death.

Lease the vineyard to other tenants. Since God's chosen people rejected their Messiah, God would then open up the Kingdom to the Gentiles, something that was always part of his plan. However, the Gentiles are not to become like the Jews, for God requires them to give him the produce at the harvest time. If they do not, they too will find themselves on the wrong side of judgement: <<**All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left**>> (Matthew 25:32-33). Surely, no one wants to be a goat!

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?

Matthew 21:42

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone is taken from Psalm 118:22-23, which is part of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118), and is recited during Passover. It is only a few verses away from the praise the children were giving him so recently in v.15. The rejected Son will receive the position of ultimate prominence and importance. Rejecting the stone is the same as rejecting the Son.

The cornerstone is foundational to buildings and here almost certainly refers to the main stone in the temple's structure. It also alludes to the new covenant community as being the new temple of God, with Christ as its foundational rock: <<**and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ**>> (1 Corinthians 10:4).

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

Matthew 21:43

The Kingdom of God will be taken away. These leaders had failed to carry out their obligations to God both in their personal lives and in leading the nation of Israel. Their privileged role in caring for God's vineyard, i.e. the Kingdom, is now being taken away and given to a people that produces the fruits of the Kingdom.

The church will be a new people, Greek *ethnos* also meaning nation, consisting of disciples, both Jews and Gentiles, gathered out of many nations: <<**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father**

*and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit>> (Matthew 28:19), where *ethnei* is the plural of *ethnos*, and brought together as one new nation: <<**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light**>> (1 Peter 2:9), again the singular Greek *ethnos*, in the unfolding of God's Kingdom in the present age.*

⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

Some manuscripts omit v.44.

Matthew 21:44

The one who falls on this stone. Using the Jewish interpretation method called *gezerah sawah*, which links verses on the basis of the key terms they share, this passage develops the cornerstone idea. This is a method that Peter would later use to excellent effect: <<**For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'** To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner', and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do>> (1 Peter 2:6-8).

It will crush anyone on whom it falls. Daniel foresaw this, in part, in one of his visions: <<**And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever**>> (Daniel 2:44). It is a stone that will damage the unrepentant: <<**On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth shall come together against it**>> (Zechariah 12:3). The candlestick of the Jewish church was about to be removed: <<**But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent**>> (Revelation 2:4-5).

Paul, a devout Jew and once a zealous Pharisee, came to realise the faults of 1st Century Judaism, inherited from the traditions of the elders, and would sum it up in part: <<**For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judæa, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last**>> (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). The unbelief of sinners will be their ruin.

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Matthew 21:45-46

They realised that he was speaking about them. The chief priests and the Pharisees were not fools and they wanted rid of this thorn in their flesh. It is a pity they did not seek the Lord on this in prayer as Paul did: <<*Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me*>> (2 Corinthians 12:7b-9).

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds. Had they really believed Jesus to be a blasphemer they would no doubt have given instructions to the temple guard to have him taken into custody but instead they did nothing for, just as with John the Baptist (v.26), they feared the crowds, who regarded him as a prophet. They were partly fearful that any social disorder that the arrest might cause would bring the Roman soldiers down heavily upon them. They would also have been mindful of their own public standing and would not have wished to alienate the common people.

Avoiding social disorder under Roman domination was key to these men retaining the power and status they enjoyed. Therefore, the Sadducean High Priest Caiaphas prophesied: <<*You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed*>> (John 11:50).