Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Week 72: The Kingdom of God: it is many things – all about love.

Day 497: Metaphors and analogies

Now early in the morning, as he returned to the city, he was hungry. After noticing a fig tree by the road he went to it, but found nothing on it except leaves. He said to it, "Never again will there be fruit from you!" And the fig tree withered at once.

When the disciples saw it they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" Jesus answered them, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, if you believe, you will receive."?' (Matthew 21:18-22)

This story has nothing to do with fig trees or mountains.

Say what?

In the Bible plants often refer to people and nations (see Psalm 1:3, Psalm 80:8-19, Daniel 4, and others) – it is a fairly common metaphor. Many things in the bible were metaphors for something else.

So are you saying this didn't really happen? Jesus didn't wither a fig tree?

Oh, He may well have! As I've said before, Jesus not only spoke parables, He lived them.

So what does this mean then?

Let me paraphrase it:
"God was hungry. He went to what should feed Him, but it was barren, not fulfilling its purpose. God told it He was done with it. It withered away; its life gone."

What would feed God?

Excellent question.

Recognizing that God does not need sustenance like we think of it (food, water), what do you think feeds God? What does God look for?

Share your thoughts with your fellow explorers.

Day 498: Feeding God

God looks for love. You could say that love "feeds" God – it gives Him joy. Taking care of each other, pursuing what is healthiest for each other – that "feeds" God.

As Jesus said,
"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40 – we'll get to it shortly ☺).

The food which God is looking for from His people is love.

The food which you can feed God with is love – pursuing health for yourself, for those close to you, for those far away. Pursuing what is healthiest for those you agree with, and for those who are your enemies. If your life is oriented around pursuing what is healthiest as a way of being, you are indeed on the Holy Path of God.

Note some ways you are pursuing health: for yourself, for others, for God.

Share some thoughts with your fell explorers.

Day 499: Consequences

So you're saying, "God was hungry. He went looking for love in His people, didn't find it, so told them He was done with them?"

That is what I am saying.

Isn't that rather un-loving?

Oh? Is it more loving to fertilize and help grow something which is harmful, evil, and destructive? Something death-dealing?

But these are people, not weeds!

True! Not just 'people', but 'Images of God.' And if people stop being images, they become just animals – or, as Jesus described them, 'dead' (Matthew 8:22).

Ouch.

God is very clear – His way is the way of love. If you want to live eternally with God, you must love. The bible is full of examples of people who didn't, and the consequences they faced. If you want to know how, look to Jesus: He is the way.

So he's going to kill all the rest?

This is a great question. What I do know is that Jesus calls all people to change (to repent) from being evil to being and doing good. To loving. As He says:
God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. But the one who practices the truth comes to the light, so that it may be plainly evident that his deeds have been done in God. (John 3:17-21)

God doesn't condemn people – people condemn themselves by their evil actions. This is why repentance and forgiveness are critical. There is no place for evil in God's shalom.

Many people find this hard to accept. Can you think of a more loving way for God to proceed?

Share your idea with your fellow explorers.

Day 500: Change

What about the mountain?

Ah yes! You mean, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, if you believe, you will receive."?

Yes.

Mountains are momentous places, or momentous things. Mountains could represent pinnacles where heaven and earth meet (think Jesus' transfiguration), or insurmountable obstacles (think Isaiah 40:3-5 ("every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low"). In this example, I think Jesus is saying, 'the mountain of disbelief and evil which my people are showing can be removed, if you trust God and work for it.'

Isn't that contrary to what we just discussed regarding the fig tree?

Well, let's try and put it all together. How about this paraphrase, including both the fig and the mountain:

"God is looking for love in His people. If people are unloving, they want no part of God. This will lead to their destruction. However, don't give up hope! For even the unloving can learn to love, if you trust God and keep on working at it."

Do you think Jesus truly believed that?

I think He gave His life for it.

"A leopard cannot change its spots" is a well-known saying. Yet, God has used murderers (Moses), persecutors (Saul / Paul), cowards (Gideon), doubters (Thomas), the headstrong (Peter) – there is not a person God cannot use, if that person turns to loving in God's name.

What mountains is your corner of the universe facing? How can you pray to God to move them? What actions can God lead you to try doing, in His name and His love?

Share your thoughts with your fellow explorers.

Day 501: Authority

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Matthew 21:23-27)

Jesus is asked, "By whose authority are you doing what you do? Are you from God, the devil, or are you a poached egg (to steal a line from C.S. Lewis)?" So Jesus asks in return: "John the Baptist – was he from God, or was he a poached egg?" And as we read above, they refused to decide – so Jesus left them in their indecision.

The statements of Jesus were either true, or they were from a madman (a "poached egg"). The actions of Jesus could not be refuted – but they could be from God, or they could be challenged as from evil powers (which Jesus was accused of, actually).

If you took the sayings of Jesus together with the actions of Jesus, however, they pointed to only one source – a source which the leaders refused to accept.

"Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

In your opinion, by what authority did Jesus say and do things, and who gave Him this authority? Why do you say this?

Share your thoughts and questions those you trust.

Day 502: The People of God are a'changing…

"What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." (Matthew 21:28-32)

As an aside, note that Jesus answers His own question regarding John – He states he came "in the way of righteousness" (i.e., from God).

Now Jesus gives a different illustration to the lived-out parable involving the fig tree and the mountain, this time regarding two sons, with a graphic (and to his audience, repulsive) claim: tax collectors and prostitutes, broadly considered the most sinful of the sinful, were getting into the kingdom of God before the 'upright and uptight' of the day.

The old mountain of those who claim to walk with God, but in reality are far from Him, is being replaced by the new mountain of those who did not claim to walk with God but are now close to Him, in their humility, their repentance, and their belief. The first mountain is an insurmountable obstacle, the second is where heaven and earth meet.

John came declaring repentance of evil was required – the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him, so they turned from their evil ways – and God welcomes them into His kingdom. The 'authorities' however, who felt they had everything figured out and had nothing to repent of, did not believe and did not repent, even when seeing how other peoples' lives were being transformed.

This is a troubling accusation against the 'authorities', and a rejoice-worthy confirmation of those who humbly come to God, changing their ways to lovingly pursuing health. Pray that you never become blind to God's outstretched hand of forgiveness and love, asking you to amend your ways and embrace Him.

Do you have examples where people have missed walking with God due to their blindness? Do you have examples where you have done so? Are there any areas where you need to repent?

Share your examples as you feel appropriate.

Day 503: Rest

Rest, receive nourishment, feed both body and soul. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). Pray. Dedicate this day to God. Worship! Fill yourself with Light. In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.

Know that God loves you. Celebrate, Rejoice, Give thanks, talk and walk with God. Be in shalom. Love. Pursue what is healthiest.