



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Minister: Rev Dr André J Groenewald

8 Manse Court, East Calder, Livingston, EH53 0HF

Tel: 01506 884585, Mob: 075 888 458 14, email: groenstes@yahoo.com

www.knec4jesus.org.uk



Date: 18th April 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 21:18-22

The Fig Tree Withers

¹⁸ Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. ¹⁹ Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

²⁰ When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.

²¹ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. ²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Background to the reading

Matthew tells his own story with regard to Jesus' cursing of the fig tree. His version is much shorter and more condensed than the same version in Mark who tells the same story over a period of two days. Matthew also does not tell it in a chronological way like Mark does.

Jerusalem was full of visitors during Passover season and many of the visitors consequently had to lodge outside of Jerusalem. "Morning" may have meant as early as 6 a.m. Jesus came from Bethany and was hungry when he saw a fig tree.

Usually the fig trees would have fruit at least 10 months of the year. The fig-tree of Palestine ("Ficus carica") produced two and sometimes three crops of figs in a year, namely the *bikkurah*, or "early-ripe fig" which is ripe about the end of June, dropping off as soon as it is ripe; the *kermus*, or "summer fig," which is ripe about August; and the *pag* (plural "green

figs,” also known as “the untimely fig”, or “winter fig,” which ripens in sheltered spots in spring.

Horticulturists have also pointed out that a fig tree would have fruit before it had leaves. Although by this time of year fig trees near the Mount of Olives would have green fruit, it had an unpleasant taste. The more edible figs appeared around early June. Often the green fruit would fall off, leaving only leaves. This one had leaves but no figs.

Then Jesus condemned the fig tree saying that it will never bear fruit again. And immediately the fig tree withered away. Then Jesus responded by saying if they had faith they could do the same and more, even move mountains. He did not mean this literally. “Moving mountains” was a figure of speech for doing what was virtually impossible. This promise is an illustration of the miraculous activity that characterized the ministry of some Old Testament prophets, like Elijah and Elisha.

Matthew is actually using the picture of the fig tree as a symbol of portraying Israel like it was often done in the Old Testament. In Hosea 9:10 we read that God spoke of Israel as the first fruits of the fig tree. In Jeremiah 32:1-10 figs are used to portray the spiritual welfare of Israel. Jesus was merely using the example of the fig tree to make a very valid point. Although Israel thinks they are serving God, they are not bearing fruit and will be condemned! It comes to the fore in the three parables that follow our reading. Although Israel show signs of faith, they do not have the fruits of people who have faith!

If they truly believe they would **receive whatever** they prayed **for**. The Lord was teaching the importance of having faith and showing signs of it. By contrast the nation of Israel had failed to exercise faith in Him.

Reflection

When I read this story I immediately wondered how a so called “atheist” or non-believer would interpret this story. I bet they would say that if it is true that if you have faith you can move mountains, why have Christians not managed to do exactly that!

And I am sure all of us would be silenced by our lack of proof. But do we lack proof? I do not think so. There are so many cases in history, even our recent history where people have figuratively “moved mountains” just because of their faith and trust in the Lord.

Let us look at one incident that happened last year in Chile. On the 5th of August 2010 a mine collapsed in Chile which trapped 33 miners. The first contact they made with the outside world was on the 23rd of August and they were only rescued after 70 days! How did they survive? They survived because they had faith in the Almighty God. And this was no secret. After their rescue they confessed that it was God who saved them. While they were trapped they had a makeshift chapel and Mario Gómez, the eldest miner, spiritually counselled his companions and led daily prayers. Mario Sepúlveda said, "I was with God, and with the Devil -- and God took me." Mónica Ávalos, the wife of the first man rescued, Florencio Ávalos, noted: "We are really religious, both my husband and I, so God was always present. It is a miracle, this rescue was so difficult, it's a grand miracle." As one story in the UK Daily Mail reported, "A deep religious faith powered this rescue; miners and families and rescuers alike believe their prayers were answered."

Both government representatives and the Chilean public have repeatedly credited Divine providence with keeping the miners alive while the Chilean public viewed their subsequent rescue as a miracle. When Esteban Rojas stepped out of the rescue capsule, he immediately knelt on the ground with his hands together in prayer then raised his arms above him in adoration.

Chile's president Sebastián Piñera stated, "When the first miner emerges safe and sound, I hope all the bells of all the churches of Chile ring out forcefully, with joy and hope. Faith has moved mountains."

What is faith? Faith is showing trust in the Lord. If we trust God we need to show it wherever we are. If we are in hospital we need to show it through our "positiveness" and witness. If we are at work, we need to make others understand that we serve the Lord God and that we will not take any discrimination or rude remarks because of our faith. If we are among friends we need to show them that we still can have good clean fun without going off the rails and abusing drugs or alcohol to the disadvantage of others. If we are in church we need to show it by our listening to God's words. If we are struggling with all sorts of issues like broken relationships or children that misbehave badly or family fights, we need to show our faith by practising forgiveness and the turning of the other cheek. Yes we too can move mountains in everyday life through our faith, following, commitment and trust in the Lord God, the maker of heaven and earth.

To have faith is like handing the “keys” of our lives over to God. By keys I mean all the things that are so important to us like time, money, wealth, power, ambition, and all the things that define us as persons. We need to trust God who is the driver of our lives. But as all backseat drivers, we need to restrain ourselves from taking over the steering wheel and trust God as the driver of our cars. We need to focus on the things we can do, and leave the things we cannot change to God to deal with. To have faith in the Lord is to know for sure: He knows best!
Amen