

Matthew 21:12-22

Pigeons, prayer and pretence



Although Matthew records these two incidents directly following Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem, checking out the other gospels suggests that his visit to the temple was not on the same day, and that the unfortunate fig tree that Jesus found empty of fruit withered overnight, rather than drooping immediately. Matthew is not quite so concerned as we might be with precise chronology, but with the take-home message(s) associated with these events.

➤ The bustling temple (12-17)

John records a similar incident at the *start* of Jesus' ministry (John 2), and some people take it that (as above), chronology is not always of great importance to the gospel writers. However, the different accounts are different enough that it's perhaps even more likely that Jesus performed this "cleansing of the temple" *twice*. The old, sinful, exploitative ways creep back in – this devious trade is just too lucrative! (And doesn't that just fit with what we *know* of fallen human nature?)

The site of this market appears to have been "the court of the Gentiles". Why is it so terrible that it is *this* space that has been re-purposed? What was Israel's original calling supposed to have been (Genesis 12:3)?

And the pigeons (12), the offering of the less well off (Leviticus 5:7,11). So does this maybe imply that Jesus particularly targeted the exploitation of those least able to bear it?

Do any of *our* religious practices alienate (or even exploit) "the outsiders"? How can we make and keep ourselves aware of this potential – and guard against it?

➤ The barren tree (18-22)

The fig tree is sometimes used in Scripture as a picture of the nation of Israel. How telling that this barren fig tree so arouses Jesus' hostility – compare, perhaps, Isaiah 1:10-15. And read on in Matthew 21 to verse 43: a chilling warning clearly forecasting the imminent end of Israel as a nation.