



## **Connect Group reflection and questions**

### **Matthew 21:23-46 – Stone Rejected**

Who is this man? The significance of this question is raised to boiling point when Jesus cleanses the temple. In Malachi 3 it says: 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty.

The cleansing of the temple, the healing of the blind and the lame and the testimony of the children all bore testimony to the identity of Jesus. Here, in their midst, was the Messiah.

While Jesus made it clear that the 'infants and nursing babies' knew how to praise him, the response of the chief priests and the scribes was one of hostility. Their vision and their power were threatened, and they set out to challenge what they saw as a blasphemous upstart. This week we witness their hostility and see Jesus' response, a response to a question designed to trap him rather than pursue a genuine answer: 'By what authority are you doing these things?' Jesus turns their challenge around with a question of his own, then tells 2 stories and draws a conclusion.

As we wrestle with the parable of the two sons and the landowner, we need to note the background. A key passage that will help us is Isaiah 5, the 'song of the vineyard'. If you read that passage you will see that the vineyard clearly refers to Israel. What is more, Isaiah 5 leads to a proclamation of judgement, the vine has gone wild and must be destroyed. This image of destruction is suggested in the parables Jesus tells but made explicit in his cryptic joining together of two biblical images. The first is a direct quote from Psalm 118:22-23 (see Matthew 21:42) while the second in v 44 may well allude to the vision of Daniel, particular 2:34. Astonishingly, this judgement leads to the handing over of the kingdom to others, namely the church (both Christian Jew and Gentile), those who will bear fruit.

This raises the question we will be exploring today. How do we handle this strong and explicit judgement of Jesus upon the leaders of his day and how do we relate all this to our own lives, our own culture and our church life?

## Questions for connect groups.

1. We are saved by faith in Jesus, but genuine faith is revealed in the quality of our lives. Read Jeremiah 7:1-15 and then Matt 7:15-27 and explore the question: 'How do we tell the difference between the bad tree referred to here and our own deep awareness of our sin and human frailty and indeed the frailty of our fellow believers.'
2. Read Isaiah 5:1-13 and ask: Are there any similarities between the culture of the time of Isaiah and that of our own?
3. Jesus was very strong in condemning the hypocrisy of the scribes and chief priests. What do we do with that in terms of our church life, particularly as we are told to not judge lest we be judged? Is there a place for condemnation? What does this mean in relation to church leaders?
4. Wilful wickedness in church is one thing, but even good churches can do a lot of 'pretending'. Is there room in our church life for the human struggle of individuals to be expressed and supported, not just the emotions of grief and loss, but also the struggle with temptation and failure?
5. Our culture believes in 'tolerance', but only if you agree with the person demanding it. In reality there is great hostility and condemnation expressed in our modern Western world. How should we respond to this? Is there a difference between the idea of tolerance and that of respect? In the light of the words of Jesus how should we as Christians live in this world.
6. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus makes it clear that his resurrection confirms that he is king with all authority. But how is that authority expressed at this point, prior to his coming? Read verse 19 to find out and ask: Are we as individuals and as a church obeying this command and doing so with a quality of life that reveals the character and the love of the king?
7. In Matthew 21:43 Jesus astonishingly forecasts that the kingdom would be taken away from those the scribes and chief priests and given to others who will produce fruit. This perhaps refers to the church, or more correctly, the true church of believers acting for Christ in the world. Pray and give thanks that we have been invited into the kingdom and pray that we might bear fruit that can be used to draw others into the embrace of our loving God.

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