

A King Who is Patient But Not Weak

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[0 : 00] Our reading from Scripture today is to be found on page 1016 of your church Bible. If you kindly turn to that, it's from St. Mark's Gospel in chapter 11, page 1016.

And at verse 27. They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders came to him.

By what authority are you doing these things, they asked, and who gave you the authority to do this? Jesus replied, I will ask you one question.

Answer me, and I'll tell you by what authority I'm doing these things. John's baptism, was it from heaven or of human origin?

Tell me. They discussed it among themselves and said, if we say from heaven, he will ask, then why didn't you believe him?

[1 : 18] But if we say of human origin, they feared the people, for everyone held that John was really a prophet. So they answered Jesus, we don't know.

Jesus said, neither will I tell you by what authority I'm doing these things. And then Jesus began to speak to them in parables.

A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower. And then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

At harvest time, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

And then he sent another servant to them. They struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others.

[2 : 26] Some of them they beat, and others they killed. He had one left to send, a son whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, they'll respect my son.

But the tenants said to one another, this is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. And so they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He'll come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of scripture?

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's marvelous in our eyes. And then the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders looked for a way to arrest him, because they knew he'd spoken this parable against them.

But they were afraid of the crowd, and so they left him and went away. Thanks be to God. Please do keep a finger in that passage.

[3 : 44] We'll be looking at it for the next few minutes together. But as we do, let me pray and ask that God would help us to understand Jesus properly. Let's pray together. We thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for your great kindness that we have the Bible in our own language and freedom to study it today.

And we pray, please, that you would help us to understand what you've said to us, and you'd help us to see Jesus more clearly and to trust him for ourselves.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Well, let me extend a welcome to you again. My name is Andy Gemmel. I'm a member of the congregation here. It's great to have you here if you're a visitor.

Welcome. We hope you have a great time with us. I'm afraid I'm going to start with a really bad word this morning. I apologize in advance. I know it's not a good word, not one you came to church to hear.

I know it's a risky place to start, but I'm going to do it anyway. Here we go. Brexit. I'm sorry. I know it's a bad word. It's a bad word. Let me assure you this is not a political speech, but just bear with me for a moment.

[4 : 49] Don't you feel like it's a good word? Haven't you felt at some point during this whole thing a mixture of incredulity and longing and probably outrage?

Incredulity. What an extraordinary mess. How did we get here? Longing. Don't you just long for it to be done with? For something good to come of it in the end sometime soon?

Don't you long for somebody to be able to cut through all the divisions and the self-interest and the posturing and actually do something? On the other hand, outrage.

More recently, perhaps, when somebody does try to do something, what right has he got? There's been great offense in the last couple of weeks, hasn't there? It's often the case, isn't it, that in human affairs, we long for a solution, but will not recognize that any individual can dictate what that solution should be.

What right has he got to say what should happen? What right does she have to impose her will on the rest of us? Just a minute, who are you to say what you've just said?

[6 : 07] We're very nervous of individuals having too much influence and for good reasons. Listen to Winston Churchill on democracy. Many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe.

No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

Who gave you the right, we say, to the Robert Mugabe's of this world or the Kim Jong-un's of this world? Who gave you the right to do what you've done in relation to all these people?

Well, that is exactly what everybody is saying in the temple in Jerusalem in verse 28. Just look down at the page at number 28, please. What right do you have, Jesus?

Who said you could do that, what you just did? We're in Jerusalem. It's the Passover festival. And Jesus returns to the temple where the day before he caused huge uproar by disrupting the sacrificial system and saying that the whole thing was corrupt and was coming to an end forever.

[7 : 28] And not surprisingly, the people who run the thing are immediately on his case. I mean, imagine if here last Sunday, someone had come bursting through the door at the back and started breaking things, shoving the lectern over, pouring the tea all over the floor, breaking the windows in the creche room, smashing the musical instruments, and so on.

And saying, this thing here, St. Silas, is totally corrupt. You're never going to be allowed to do church here again. How would you feel about that?

And how would you feel if they came back today? Well, verse 28, the leaders attach themselves to him. What right have you to say that and do that?

We're in charge here. We didn't say that. Well, the rest of this passage is about Jesus' response to that question. What right have you? Whose authority?

Where did you get it from? And it's really worth us looking at what he says, because even now, that question is such a common question when it comes to thinking about Jesus.

[8 : 35] What right does he have to say what we should do? Who gave you the authority, Jesus? What authority do you have over my people, says that dictator, and bans anyone from speaking about Jesus in public?

Who gave you the right to tell me what to do, says someone thinking about the claims of Jesus, because he claims that right. Now, there are two parts to his response.

First, there's a question, and then there's a story. Let's look at the question first. Verse 29, Jesus replied, I'll ask you one question. Answer me, and I'll tell you by what authority I'm doing these things.

John's baptism. Was it from heaven or of human origin? Tell me. Now, at first sight, I think this looks a bit like playing silly games.

You know, you answer my question, and I'll answer yours. But it isn't, because embedded in Jesus' question is the answer to the question they've just asked. Let me explain. You see, there's a link between what Jesus has just done, overturning the stuff in the temple, and John the Baptist, the one that he asks about.

[9 : 50] If you were here last week, last week we learned how it was expected that God's king was going to come to Jerusalem in the end, promised in advance by the prophets.

And so it wasn't a surprise to the crowds in Jerusalem when Jesus came in riding on a donkey, for that's exactly how the prophets had said that you'd recognize the king that was coming. They'd also

been told that God was going to visit his temple and assess it. Keep a finger and mark, please, and flip back a couple of books in the Bible to the book of Malachi. You'll find it on page 961. Just turn back with me a few pages to page 961.

These are words spoken several hundred years before Jesus came, and it promises a visit to the temple.

Malachi chapter 3. I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.

[10:56] Then suddenly the Lord you're seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, says the Lord. But, verse 2, who can endure the day of his coming?

It might not be a comfortable visit when the Lord comes to his temple. Now turn on. Notice before you do that the Lord is going to be announced by a messenger.

I'll send my messenger before me. Now turn to the very beginning of Mark's gospel, Mark chapter 1. Mark introduces his gospel with that statement.

Mark chapter 1, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah. As it's written in Isaiah the prophet, in fact, it's a composite quotation.

But the first bit's from the book of Malachi. I'll send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way. And the writer follows on, verse 4.

[11:57] And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. He's the messenger preparing the way of God's visit to the temple.

And look what he says, verse 7. He talks about the one coming after him. This was John's message. After me comes one more powerful than I am.

The straps of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie. Now, back to Mark chapter 11, please. Why does Jesus ask them about John?

Answer, because if they answer that question, they'll answer their own question. If John's from heaven, then the one coming after him, the one he talked about, must be from heaven.

If not, well, they've got a problem. Because if they don't agree that John is from heaven, the crowd thinks that John is from heaven.

[13:06] And they have the people to deal with. Popularity is ever such a difficult thing to deal with, isn't it? I mean, at one level, we all long to be popular. But we see it in our politicians all the time.

I guess most people, when they try to get into politics, do it with high ideals. They want to make a difference. They want to help. But it gets more complicated, doesn't it, when you actually get into the position of power.

For if you don't have power, you've got nothing to lose. But once you've got it, the thought of losing it again is very difficult for most people to bear. Which is why, often, our politicians seem to become less ideologically minded and more defensive when they're actually in charge.

You worry about what the people will think of you. For they determine your career, your future, your reputation in the world. If you can't keep them happy, you're in trouble.

And so, verse 31, they call an emergency cabinet meeting. They discussed it among themselves and said, If we say from heaven, he'll ask, then why didn't you believe him?

[14:17] But if we say of human origin, they fear the people. For everyone held that John really was a prophet. So they said, We don't know. Do you notice how, what matters to them most is how the people will respond.

And notice the way these two options are recorded here. Do you notice it? It's very brilliantly written, this. One option is discussed. If we say from heaven, he'll ask, Why didn't you believe him?

That's difficult enough. But if we say of human origin, Well, the second possibility is unthinkable. They can't possibly say that. The people think John is from God.

And if we go saying his message was just a human message, that will be the end of us. Notice what they're afraid of and what they're not afraid of. They're afraid of people's opinions.

They're afraid of humans. Completely unafraid of God. Terrified of what the people will think of them. Indifferent to the real issue. What God will think of them.

[15:26] And so, how pathetic they look, don't they? Uh, we don't know. Unable to say anything.

Because they're stuck. Now, of course, many people operate like this. Not just them back then. You would think the big issue in deciding about Jesus was this.

Is he true or not? You would think the decision making about Jesus would go like this. He claims big things. I have to think about those.

Is he speaking the truth or not? I wonder. It'd be worth being sure about that. I ought to find out. You'd think it would go that way. But for many people, it goes quite differently from that. Not, is it true? I must find out. But rather, what will people think of me if I begin to look for myself? My husband, my wife, my friends, my colleagues.

[16:27] What will they think of me if I begin to look? Not that many people decide not to follow Jesus because they think there isn't enough evidence. Far more people decide what they're going to do with Jesus on the basis of how they think their friends and families will react.

I remember once a friend of mine and myself getting together some friends around the dinner table to discuss Christianity. We invited them around for dinner. We're going to have a talk about Christianity.

A friend of ours kicked off the discussion and we had a great evening. We were all good friends. We knew each other well. And we had a terrific evening talking about that subject. There was a married couple there, good friends of ours.

The day after, she came and spoke to me. Thanks for last night. It was so interesting. I loved it. I'd really like to know more about Jesus.

But Chris isn't keen. I just can't. Such a sad way to decide, isn't it? About somebody so important. And so they say, we don't know.

[17:34] And everybody knows that's not true. They know it. Jesus knows it. They know that he knows it. And so when he says, neither will I tell you by what authority I'm doing these things, they know he doesn't need to tell them because they already have the answer.

That's the question. A difficult question to answer. One that they couldn't answer. And then there's the story, chapter 12. And the story tells them, lest they were in any doubt, that he knows exactly what they're doing.

A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it. He dug a pit for the wine press. He built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

It's not a complicated story, is it? I guess it seems a bit odd to us. But in those days, it would have been quite common for people to own land and employ other people to manage it.

So picture in your mind, for example, a businessman who's bought a fair bit of land somewhere. It wouldn't work in Scotland because he wants to grow grapes.

[18:39] He's built a terrific vineyard. It's well-equipped. It's marvelous. It's in a good situation. There's even some sunshine. It's got its own on-site bottling plant.

But he's not a farmer himself. So he hires some vine-growing men. The deal is done. The papers are signed. Off he goes. But it seems that once he's gone, his vine growers decide they're on a good number here.

And it proves to be so. It's a fruitful vineyard. And though it would be the right thing to send him some of the profits of his enterprise, well, he's a long way away.

And there aren't telephones or email to complicate things. So they decide they're not going to respond when the time comes. And every time he sends a messenger, the treatment gets more extreme.

Some are injured. Some are killed. Eventually, there's no one else to send left but the son of the family. He's a respected man in his own right. Surely that will have the desired effect.

[19:45] But it doesn't. Verse 7. The tenants said to one another, This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours. So they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.

Seems a bit odd, that, doesn't it? It's not obvious how they could think that they would be written into the will or anything like that. But I think the point is this. They've assumed that the owner is totally out of touch.

That if they get rid of this son, They as occupiers will be left alone to get all the profits for themselves.

So they kill the son. But the story isn't going to end as they thought. You see, they've misjudged the owner. And it's easy to see why they might misjudge the owner. Because he hasn't behaved the way you would normally behave if you were the owner.

How would you behave if you were the owner? Well, depending on where you lived, you do different things. If you happen to be, I don't know, a sophisticated businessman, You'd probably get your lawyers on the job immediately.

[20 : 58] If you happen to be a Glasgow businessman, You'd probably send your boys around with the baseball bats. This owner is a bit different from that. Time after time, he gives them the opportunity to respond positively.

It's quite extraordinary, isn't it? No one would behave like this unless he wanted their willing cooperation in this venture. But they took patience for weakness.

Thinking that if they just ignored the messengers, just killed the son, Then in the end, they could keep what they'd been given. But what a misjudgment that was, for it was not weakness.

Look at verse 9. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He'll come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture?

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's marvelous in our eyes. Very easy in life to mistake patience for weakness.

[22 : 05] We had a teacher at school, an elderly man, kind of genteel, not given to outbursts, and from time to time, as 15-year-olds do, we played up.

And mostly, nothing happened until one day when my friend Steve overdid it. And it was a nightmare.

For he was unimaginably angry. You see, he wasn't weak. He was patient. But one day, his patience ran out.

And let me assure you, we never went near that again. It was terrifying. Beware the anger of a patient man, says the proverb.

Well, that's the story. And notice that they read themselves into the story. Verse 12. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he'd spoken the parable against them.

[23 : 17] But they were afraid of the crowd. So they left him. They know he's spoken against them. Why do they know that? Well, the answer is because this is a story they've heard before.

Keep your finger in Mark 11 and skip a bit further back in the Bible to Isaiah chapter 5. You'll find this on page 690. Isaiah chapter 5, page 690.

For us, this may be the first time we've heard this story. For them, it certainly wasn't. For in this important book in the Old Testament comes a song.

And it's a song about a man who planted a vineyard. Look at chapter 5 and verse 1. I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and he cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

[24 : 17] Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more could have been done for it than I've done for it? When I look for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? I'll tell you what I'm going to do to my vineyard. I'll take away its hedge. It'll be destroyed.

I'll break down its wall and it'll be trampled. I'll make it a wasteland, either pruned or cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I'll command the crowds not to rain in it. The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel.

And the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed. For righteousness, but heard cries of distress. That's the story in the background to Jesus' story in Mark chapter 11.

Just turn back to that chapter. Isaiah talks to a vineyard that hasn't produced fruit for a long time.

[25 : 20] The people of Israel have not related rightly to God for a long time. And Jesus' audience could not have failed to know that story. And here Jesus retells it, but notice there are additions as he retells it.

First, there are tenant farmers. And the way Jesus tells the story puts all the focus on the farmers and what they've not done. He's talking about his questioners, the people who are questioning his authority to come and do what he wants with his people.

The second thing he puts in are messengers. And these, of course, are the prophets, God's messengers to Israel over hundreds of years, urging them to turn back to relationship with God.

A sign of God's phenomenal patience, not sending the boys around with the baseball bats. But the people of Israel took it as a sign of weakness.

So easy to think, isn't it? I haven't got in trouble yet for ignoring God. Perhaps I won't. And the third one, of course, is the son.

[26 : 34] This story has got a son in. And it's clear from what's being said that Jesus is talking about himself. Now, why the strong reaction to Jesus' story from these people?

Answer, because this story shows that he knows exactly what they're thinking. Three very shocking things about them, which could not have been seen from the outside, but are very clear in this story. And as we look at these three things this story tells about them, I want to make some connections with our own day. Because what is true of these leaders then is so easily true of leaders in any age and human beings in general.

Three key words. Number one, possession. Look at verse 7. They want to possess for themselves what belongs to God. In this case, these people want to control the people of Israel for themselves. Very easy for leaders of any kind to want to be in charge of, to own those they're responsible for. Don't we so easily want people to love us, to like us, to acknowledge us, to respect us, to listen to us.

[27 : 52] You've probably all met in your lives little empire builders. It might be the politician, or the bully in your workplace, or the domineering person in your family, or wherever it is.

And of course, it can be true in religious circles, can't it? There's a famous church in London called All Souls Langham Place, which had, last century, a very famous preacher for many years, John Stott, and that the rector of the church that followed him used to regularly get phoned up on a Sunday morning for people wanting to check out whether this was the church they wanted to go to. And the conversation would go like this. Hello, can you help me? Is this John Stott's church? To which Michael Bourne, the rector, would say repeatedly, no, this church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's just the answer, isn't it? It's so easy to think of it as my church, if you're the rector. But God's people are not the possession of God's leaders. One hears from time to time in all sorts of churches of areas of church life in which people have become possessive of their little patch.

My brother-in-law is a minister in Northern Ireland. His church, one church that he used to have and work in had a robed choir. And the tradition was that every morning the robed choir would possess down the aisle at the beginning of the service and array themselves behind the minister at the beginning.

[29 : 13] And after a while, they decided that that was just a bit retro and passé and they really oughtn't to do it anymore. And that the members of the choir should just be there at the front at the end rather than grandly processing down the aisle.

And that was fine for everybody apart from two people. Two people who absolutely resented the change and the lack of prominence. and two women who every Sunday after that, no matter that all the others were arranged at the front, relentlessly pursued their way down the middle elbowing people out the way in order to make their statement and be at the front.

Now that's amazingly petty. And of course it doesn't threaten Jesus that kind of thing, does it?

There are many sorts of possession which though they look less foolish than that are no less petty. So folks, whatever it is you're involved in at church, whatever you run, whatever you're responsible for, it could be the home group or the young people's group or the mum's group or the group for the elderly people or the music group or the Sunday school class, they belong to the Lord Jesus not to you.

They're his, not yours. Beware. This is not your little kingdom. It's his. First word, possession. Second word, fear.

[30 : 37] Because they want to possess people they are afraid of them. And it must always be the case because if you want people to be yours ultimately they'll master you. You'll be ruled over by what you think they want and what you think will please them and what you can get away with.

Truth will always come a poor second to expediency. And we ought to pray for our leaders, oughtn't we? National, local, church leaders, people in responsibility and work that God would give them courage to say and do what's right rather than what is merely acceptable to those that they're in charge of.

to be willing to speak the truth when they know it may not be acceptable. Second word, fear.

Third word, recognition. This is perhaps the most shocking of all. Look at verse 7. All the way through Mark's gospel Jesus has been received with hostility by the religious leaders.

Why is that? Well, it could have been an honest mistake, couldn't it? People in responsibility are always suspicious and rightly so sometimes of those who come along making big claims.

[31 : 59] Or perhaps they're just temperamentally like civil servants. They don't like the status quo being upset. But verse 7 says different, doesn't it? Verse 7 suggests these people recognized exactly who Jesus was.

This is the son. Let's kill him. That's what Jesus thinks they're doing. He's the rightful owner and we want to possess what belongs to him. They knew him for who he was and so they wanted to kill him.

Now of course that doesn't go well because the scriptures says Jesus announce in advance verse 10 that God knows that's going to happen. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.

This cornerstone, the most important stone in the building, something that you have rejected but God will raise up. Their response to Jesus is hostile but futile.

Its weakness is seen that they cannot do it yet because they're afraid. Its ultimate weakness is seen in that when they did kill him God reversed it by raising him from the dead.

[33 : 14] Okay, well our time is nearly gone. Let me conclude. This short sermon series in Mark 11 and 12 is titled Jesus, the king we might not want but we really need.

Why might we not want a king like Jesus? Well, the answer is from this passage because he's really properly in charge. properly in charge.

I remember resenting that idea before I was a Christian. I come from a sort of Christian-ish family, church-going family and to be honest, I wasn't, I thought, terribly hostile to Christianity before I became a Christian but I remember during my summer holidays before I went to university, a religious person came round our door and knocked on it.

I had no idea what sort of religious person they were because I got rid of them as soon as I decently could and I remember as I closed the door thinking to myself, when I go to university, I will not meet people like that because I do not want God to interfere with my life.

An interesting thought that, isn't it? For I had little reason to suspect that God interfering with my life would necessarily be unpleasant but I felt it really deeply at that point.

[34 : 39] Of course, I went to university and the guy next door was a Christian and then I met two, you know, I will not meet people like that. I will not meet people like that was about the most arrogant statement we could possibly have made. Folks, if that's you, don't mistake God's patience for weakness.

God gives us many chances in life to turn around, many warnings, many messengers. How easy it is for us to interpret that as weakness.

God won't mind if I just get on with ignoring him in life. God won't mind if I just call my life my own. Don't mistake that, God's present seeming inactivity for weakness.

weakness. But why might we really need a king like this? Well, we reflect at the beginning on how democracy is okay much of the time, but really a limiter on corrupt human rule and totally ill-equipped to deal with so many things in life.

And don't you find that true of the world in general? There are just so many things, just terrible things about this world that are way beyond our sorting out.

[35 : 56] I mean, Brexit's way beyond our sorting out. How on earth is that going to go? Who knows? You may have issues in your own life, in your health, your family relationships, worries about the world, concern for the environment, for global warming, for the terrific injustices that happen all the time everywhere.

way beyond human ability to sort out. Now, of course, submitting to another rule would mean handing the reins over to someone else.

But what is not to admire about this person? Jesus is powerful, powerful enough to heal with a word, the sick, to conquer supernatural evil, even power over the inanimate world, fearlessly truthful, not afraid of conflict when it needs to happen, brave, selfless, overwhelmingly kind towards hostile people, not fooled by human pretentiousness at all, but self-sacrificing, offering forgiveness to those who are hostile to him, giving his own life so that people can be forgiven for trying to possess what belongs to him, namely themselves and their world.

If he's the king of the world really, what is there to fear in trusting him? He's just so impressive. What promise could he fail to keep?

What sin would he not forgive? He died so that people could be forgiven. What danger would he be too weak to overcome in the end?

[37 : 50] What could you possibly lose if you gained him? How could you be worse off in life if he were in charge?

What's not to like? The king we might not want, but absolutely the one we need. Let's pray together. By what authority are you doing these things, they asked? Who gave you this? And in the question and in the story, he demonstrates that he knows everything about them, answers them in ways they can't respond to, and in every way possible demonstrates that he has authority to say what's what. What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? When we think of you as being mean, unkind, and when we think of your rule over us as being something we would really hate, thank you that you have sent us a king, powerful, loving, kind, patient, generous, willing to give himself, his life, so that our sins might be forgiven. Help us not to mistake his patience for indifference and weakness. Help us rather gladly to have him rule over us.

[39 : 58] This we ask in his name. Amen.