

## "Rejection"

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 7 December 2003 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Mark 11:12-14; 11:20 – 12:12
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Mark 11:12-14; 11:20 – 12:12
<b><u>Hymns</u></b>	367, 315, 374 from Mission Praise
<b><u>Songs</u></b>	378, 324, 321, 391, 388 from Mission Praise
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How do *you* cope with rejection?

Most of us simply don't.

We need to be loved.

We need to feel valued.

We need to be praised  
and appreciated.

Most of us actually don't even need to be rejected.

The fear of rejection is enough.

Today's obsession with the body beautiful leads many youngsters  
and adults too,

to despair at the fear of being rejected by their peers.

Husbands are rejected by their wives,

and wives by their husbands.

Many no longer take on the responsibilities of marriage

for fear that they will be rejected further down the marital road.

Children are rejected in the outfall of divorce.

Ethnic minorities often feel rejected even in their home country

or in countries where they seek asylum

or simply a new life away from the hardships of their own land.

We face rejection and contempt

when we attempt to defend the Name of Christ,

or argue for creation instead of evolution,

sexual purity against promiscuity,

truth rather than hypocrisy,

mercy rather than judgement,

love instead of hate,

and good rather than evil.

And we live in a society which has rejected  
and continues to actively reject God himself.

In a nation which has a heritage built on Christian values,  
we now have no political party that even pretends to promote such values,  
hence it is impossible to cast a vote for a return to a  
Christian basis for society.

Even though Tony Blair purports to hold Christian values,  
his government is constantly embroiled in lies,  
half truths  
and hypocrisy.  
Spin and counter-spin are hallmarks of the day.

Vast amounts of government time are spent on peripheral issues,  
whilst our national industries bleed to death,  
our employment haemorrhages,  
law and order crumbles  
and public services fail to deliver the needs of the people.

Yet at no point are true Christian principles applied to these issues,  
for God has been rejected by our nation.

Even Christmas would have completely returned to its pagan roots,  
were it not for the tireless dedication of the minority Christian population  
who continue to insist  
(and thank God that they do)  
that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus.

A colleague of mine at work who is a Christian told me that he and his family have  
decided to abandon the commercial aspects of Christmas  
and concentrate on the spiritual side,  
so they are no longer giving large gifts or sending out cards.  
I think he has a point and I applaud his position,  
though to me,  
the giving of gifts  
and the sending of cards  
is our way of rejoicing with you  
and celebrating the gift of God  
and the glad tidings of the gospel.

Is it possible that the woes of our nation are the direct result of our rejection of  
that very gospel?  
I suspect that they are.

Rejection is a part of the world we live in,  
the lives we lead  
the way we treat one another,

and the way we treat the God who made us.

So as we read our bibles we find that rejection of God has been the hallmark of humanity

since the beginning of man's sojourn on this Earth.

As I said last time I preached,

we have found that the Bible concurs with what we observe in reality  
and that is one of the reasons why we believe it.

In the very beginning,

Adam & Eve rejected God's authority,  
and disobeyed his command  
so God ejected them from the Garden of Eden.

By the time of Noah,

men had rejected God completely and their wickedness was so great  
that he destroyed all but eight persons in the flood.

Yet their descendents also rejected God,

so God called Abraham and of him made a great nation –  
the nation of Israel.

But they too rejected God,

so he sent his prophets to stir them up.

Elijah,

Elisha,

Amos,

Hosea,

Isaiah,

Micah,

Nahum,

Zephaniah,

Habakkuk

and Jeremiah,

but they would not heed them,

so God abandoned them to the barbarity of the Assyrians  
and the Babylonians.

Yet in his mercy he restored Judah under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Their descendents never actually rejected God,

but by the time Christ came to redeem his people

they had so legalised their religion

that true life had all but died out

and few remained to acknowledge the coming of their Messiah  
at that first Christmas which we shall celebrate throughout the month  
of December.

And so they rejected Him too.

This is the substance of our passage this evening.

The previous day,

Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph,

to the adulation of the crowds,  
but after a quick survey of the temple  
he had retired for the night to Bethany  
outside the city.

As he returned to Jerusalem the following morning,  
on the way as we now know to cleanse the temple,  
Jesus makes a small detour seeking figs on a fig tree.  
On finding none,  
he curses the fig tree and moves on toward his goal.

That day he caused mayhem in the temple,  
preached and taught  
and when evening came,  
returned once more to Bethany for the night.

We pick up the story again on the following morning  
as he crosses the valley with his disciples  
and climbs back up to Jerusalem.  
On the way, they pass the hapless fig-tree  
already withering from the blast of Jesus' curse.

Our tendency here is to feel sorry for the fig-tree  
and cross with Jesus for being so petty and petulant.  
What harm had the fig-tree done to him?  
And why curse it for not having fruit out of season.

Yet in fact we too would have no compunction in uprooting a fruitless tree  
to make space for one which would yield what we expected.  
Surely here too,  
when the maker and creator comes calling for the fruits of his creation,  
he, above all people, has the right to pass judgement on its fruitlessness.

And this is precisely the meaning of this acted parable.

The fig-tree is a figure of the nation of Israel.  
Once more,  
just as in ancient times,  
God has come seeking fruit from his people and there is none,  
and the fruitless nation is again cursed and rejected.

The disciples are amazed that the tree has responded so quickly to Jesus' curse the  
previous morning,  
but Jesus is not surprised  
and uses the occasion to teach them more about prayer.

Jesus words here have caused us his followers so much joy  
and so much grief  
down the centuries,

that we gloss over them to our loss.  
 The problem is that Jesus words promise us on face value everything we wish  
 and everything we want.  
 Like a child's dream of Christmas – All he has to do is ask Santa and Santa  
 will deliver:  
     Game boys and Barbie dolls,  
         Action men and construction kits,  
             skateboards and mountain bikes  
                 and loads and loads of chocolate and sweets.  
 All we have to do is ask in faith,  
     believing that God will answer.  
         and we can have anything we want.  
 But it doesn't always work out that way.  
     And we wonder why.

There can hardly be one of us here who has not prayed with all sincerity  
 yet felt that somehow God isn't listening  
     and our request is gently but firmly refused!!

When I was in my early twenties,  
     before I was married and came here  
     I attended a small gathering of Christians who loved their Lord in  
     Sawbridgeworth.  
 We put on a series of gospel meetings  
     and we leafleted the entire surrounding area of the town.  
 I prayed in the prayer meetings that God would bring people in  
     and that they would find Christ.  
     I prayed on every doorstep as I took each leaflet to the door.  
 I believed with every brain cell that I had  
     and I knew that God would answer.  
 But nobody came to those meetings.

So we all come to this portion with some very hard questions on our lips.  
 There can be no simple answers  
     and certainly I do not have pat answers to a problem which has  
     frustrated so many of God's people  
     ever since Christ spoke these very words.

But the bible mentions at least ten reasons why our prayers go unanswered.  
 Disobedience, (Deuteronomy 1:41-45; 1 Samuel 14:37; 28:6)  
 secret sin, (Psalm 66:18)  
 indifference, (Proverbs 1:23-28)  
 lack of mercy, (Proverbs 21:13)  
 despising God's word, (Proverbs 28:9)  
     blood-guilt, (Isaiah 1:15-17)  
     iniquity, (Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4)  
     stubbornness, (Zechariah 7:13)  
     instability or doubt, (James 1:6-7)  
     self-indulgence. (James 4:3)

And then on top of these,  
 lack of faith (implied in Mark 11:24)  
 and lack of forgiveness (implied in Mark 11:25)

Thank God he doesn't wait for us to be perfect before he listens to our pleas.

So there are some things we have to note:

Firstly we must see that the power of prayer lies *not* in the one who prays,  
 but in the God to whom we pray.

Secondly, our attitude when we pray has to be one of faith.

What is the use of praying to a God in whom we do not believe.  
 Yet elsewhere Jesus tells us that the tiniest faith is enough for God to outpour the  
 greatness of his power.

And indeed many can quote examples  
 of how they have prayed,  
 hardly daring to believe  
 and they have been amazed when God answered in such a spectacular way.

Thirdly, when we use such Scriptures to beat each other over the head  
 asserting that your prayers are not answered because you have too little faith,  
 we commit a grievous sin.

Satan is the great accuser of the saints,  
 and when we malign each other in this way,  
 tears of joy roll down his face,  
 for at that point we become his agents and we do the Devil's work for him.

In other places,  
 Jesus presents God as a loving and caring Father who understands the needs of  
 his people  
 and will grant the requests of his children  
 in accordance with his power,  
 his will  
 and the discrete and personal needs of each one.

Yet even here Jesus reminds us that we are sinners  
 and that we need forgiveness.  
 And the measure of our recognition of that  
 is our ability and willingness to forgive others.  
 One of Jesus recurring messages is that we should forgive others  
 as we have been forgiven  
 It's even in the Lord's prayer.  
 And our failure to forgive one another  
 is a true indicator of our acceptance of that forgiveness  
 and our dependence on God's mercy.

Jesus words here give us the confidence to know that the immense and limitless  
 powers of God are at our disposal

as we repeatedly and constantly bring our needs and our requests to an  
almighty and loving God.

When we were planning to marry, Ruth and I prayed for a job,  
a home  
and a church.

Before we were married we had a home and a job,  
and within six months of being married,  
we had a church.  
This one.

And we've been coming here ever since.

Charlie Moule, when this Chapel was all but empty, prayed that one day this Chapel  
would be full of young people.

He never lived to see it.  
But we have, many times

Many of you have prayed for years that God would bless this church,  
that people would come to know Christ  
that Christians should grow into disciples  
and that this church would continue to witness to the name of Christ.  
And we have seen those prayers answered time and time again.

So don't give up!  
Trust Him  
and put your faith in Him  
and he will not let you down.

Your prayers will be answered.  
All your needs will be supplied  
And God will bless when you least expect it.

Moving on, Jesus goes up to the temple and begins to preach and teach.  
But it is not long before the Jewish elders and authorities arrive to question  
this strange Galilean rabbi  
who had the audacity to cause havoc yesterday in the temple court.

Clearly, they were within their rights to do so.  
We would do the same if someone came in here creating mayhem in the Chapel.  
But these men already had their agenda.

Knowing full well that he had no authority but his own,  
they ask him by whose authority he did these things.  
You see, Jesus didn't conform.  
Any normal Rabbi would have belonged to a Rabbinic school  
and been able to quote numerous precedents for what he did or taught.  
But Jesus only ever claimed his own authority,  
or that of God himself,  
whom he always referred to as his Father.

Jesus answers them with a question:

“John’s baptism? Was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!” (Mark 11:30)

They were confounded and declined to answer.

Their greatest condemnation is that they do not seem to have considered the Lord’s question as a moral probe,

but purely as an intellectual catch question.

So rather than face up to the moral reality of the question,

they gave a safe answer,

which was of course no answer at all,

and Jesus tantalisingly replies,

“Then neither will I answer you.”

The root of the trouble lay not in their intellects,

but in their stubborn wills.

They stood self-condemned.

The Lord’s question was not a trap.

It was yet another opportunity for them to realise and confess their blindness  
and ask for sight.

Given, then, their unwillingness to face up to genuine debate,

Jesus resorts to parables.

A man built a vineyard and let it out to tenants.

When the time came for some return, he sent his servant to collect.

But the tenants beat him and threw him out.

The next was beaten too, and the next was killed, and so were many of the others.

Finally he sent his own son, but they rejected and killed him too.

None of this was lost on the Jewish leaders.

The story is borrowed from Isaiah 5;

a book which most of us neither know nor understand.

But these men loved Isaiah.

They knew it inside out

and they knew that the vineyard was the nation of Israel,

and the servants were the prophets.

They themselves acknowledged that their forefathers had maltreated the prophets

and fondly believed that they were above such wickedness.

But Jesus goes on -

What will the owner do?

He will come and destroy those tenants

and give the vineyard to others who will yield fruit in due time.

The condemnation on Israel is clear and stark.

If they reject the Son,

then God will reject them

and give his glorious message of salvation to others.

They saw it,

grasped it  
and were consumed with fury  
and went away determined to kill this man,  
rather than repent before a holy God.

It is because of *their* rejection of God that the gospel is given to *us*.  
God spreads his arms out in grace and mercy to the whole world.  
No longer does he have just a chosen people  
for he offers his great mercy to all men.

The builders may have rejected the stone,  
but in God's grace it has become the corner stone of salvation for all men  
for the stone is Jesus the only Son of almighty God himself.

But the message remains,  
that if we reject him he will reject us,  
but if we *accept* him he will *accept* us in his mercy and his love  
and grant us all the privileges of his kingdom,  
and the benefits of belonging to the family of God.

The message is to you and your children and to your children's children  
and it ours for the receiving if we will but accept that Jesus *is* the Son of God.

May this be our choice in this renegade world  
and may we no longer feel rejected and forlorn in this fallen world  
but go out with heads held high,  
with confidence in a God who has the power to answer prayer  
and who delights to forgive sin,  
knowing that we are the accepted ones in Christ Jesus.

May not one of us go out of here tonight,  
or listen to the recording of this message,  
or read this sermon on our web site  
without falling on our knees  
and accepting Jesus the Son of God,  
not only as the saviour of the world  
but as our personal saviour too.

Pray the prayer of faith,  
accept forgiveness from God  
and accept Jesus today.

Stop being a reject and be accepted instead.

May God bless each and every one of you.

Amen