

Mark 11:1-10, 15-18

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”’ ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

¹⁵And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written,
“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?’

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

A Clash of Kingdoms

It has taken me a long time to come to appreciate just how much trouble Jesus was asking for when he came to Jerusalem on that Sunday before Passover. And in case any of you have trouble making the connection between Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on Sunday (with crowds singing, “Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David”) and Jesus’ execution on Friday, let me paint the picture for you, and forgive me if I do so in broad strokes:

First of all, remember who was ruling over Jerusalem at the time: the Roman army, the meanest, toughest army ever known to the world. This was the beginning of an empire that in the west lasted for over 500 years and in the east for nearly 1500 years. And Romans were serious about ruling the peoples that they conquered; in 4 B.C. Jerusalem revolted against Roman rule and the result was that the Romans crucified about 2,000 of Jerusalem’s defenders. They did not play games with revolutionaries.

But not everyone had it so bad under Roman rule; the Romans were both ruthless and smart when it came to ruling other nations. They usually went to richest and most powerful people in a conquered nation and allowed those people to keep their wealth and power as long as those

people could pay Rome an annual charge, and in Jerusalem the richest and most powerful folks were the high priests, who had for over seven centuries the priests had used their religious authority to rob the poor of their land; the prophets Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all speak of the priests as a corrupt bunch – Jeremiah describes the Temple as a den of thieves seven hundred years before Jesus makes the same claim. So Rome left the same corrupt system in place, and the corrupt rulers just turned the screws harder on the peasants. That was the political/economic/religious system in place when Jesus walked throughout Palestine healing and feeding and saying things like “blessed are the poor in spirit for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven,” and “it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Now let’s consider the events that we just read about, starting with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. And notice that Jesus stages this entire event; he orders his disciples to go and *borrow* a donkey. What’s Jesus up to? He’s setting a scene that would excite everyone who had hopes of some relief from the current corrupt, oppressive system under which they were living, because about 500 years earlier a prophet named Zechariah had described how Jerusalem would be rescued from the corruption and the oppression:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

Zechariah actually goes a bit further in the verse that follows this one, saying:

He (that is, the king) will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River
to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:10)

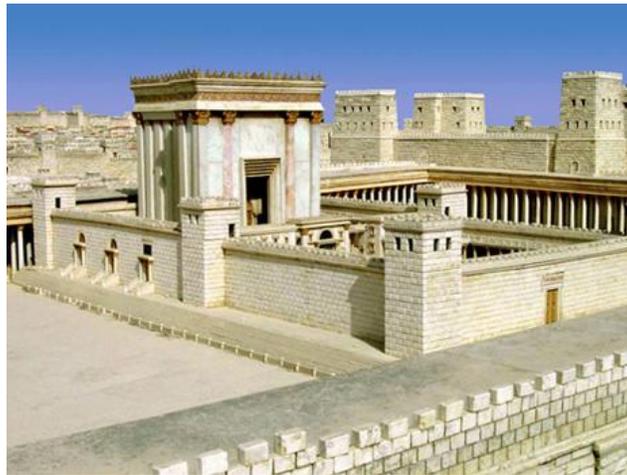
So maybe not everyone was well-versed in Hebrew prophecy, but those who *were* well-versed would have educated the others and voila! You have a crowd waving palm branches and shouting:

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

It would have become increasingly clear to the crowd that Jesus was the king, the descendent of David, the greatest King Israel had ever had, who was now coming to take charge, to “cut-off”

the chariots and the warhorses and the battle-bows, and to establish his rule “to the ends of the earth.”

Let’s add one more detail; all this is taking place at the same time that Pontius Pilate and a regiment of Roman soldiers are entering Jerusalem – at the beginning of Passover week – to reinforce the soldiers who are stationed in the city, because Passover is a Jewish celebration of liberation from a powerful empire, and the Jewish population in Jerusalem is going to increase by five fold from 40,000 to something more like 200,000 in the next few days, and the Romans need to remind the Jews who’s the boss. So imagine a Roman military parade coming into Jerusalem from the west around the same time that Jesus enters Jerusalem from the east with crowds cheering him on as the new king, and both the Romans and Jesus’ entourage are heading on a collision course toward the Temple...actually the Romans would have been heading to the Fortress Antonia which was a huge barracks built right up against this humongous temple where crowds of Jews are arriving from out-of-town on their pilgrimage to celebrate God’s deliverance of his people from foreign oppressors.



And what does Jesus do upon entering the Temple? He proceeds to knock over tables and drive out moneychangers, to cleanse the Temple of the very people who are responsible for raising money to pay Rome their tribute. And guess who’s watching all this take place from these tall towers overlooking the Temple?

If there are two things that I want you to take home today it’s that:

- Jesus intentionally and intrepidly confronted a violent and corrupt power base that exploited the common folks. For that he was a hero to the people.
- Jesus did all of this without an army behind him, without weapons or any threat of violence. In other words, Jesus fully trusted in God to vindicate him and to bring about the kingdom that he had advocated for three years without the use of swords or shields or bows and arrows.

And some might say that Jesus was suicidal to ride into Jerusalem in a manner that would so contrast the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Rome, then to create a ruckus in the Temple,

directly attacking the corrupt-but-powerful system that ran the temple and by extension the whole nation. Maybe his actions were suicidal; Jesus did, after all, know that we was going to die. But suicidal as these acts might have been, they also express a profound faith, a faith that we Christians profess with words and hopefully with deeds. Our faith is that God's kingdom of love and justice will someday supplant man's kingdom of violence and injustice. Our faith is that God gets the last word. Yes, we will all suffer death, perhaps even death as a result of violence or injustice, *but there is resurrection*. God could not allow Jesus to be defeated at the hands of evil and corruption, nor will he allow those who place their trust and hope in him to be defeated at the hands of evil and corruption. God's kingdom is coming, whether or not we help bring it about.

Our challenge is to do the hard work necessary to help bring it about. It *IS* hard work, because we may face the same opposition as Jesus. It may not present itself in the form of an oppressive or corrupt government that will silence any opposition, but you may face threats from those who disagree with you on any number of issues and consider you a threat to their well-being. Wednesday will mark the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and while we can say that the government was not responsible for Dr. King's murder we know that there are plenty of people who considered Dr. King and the ideas for which he strove a threat to their lifestyle. Are we willing to make a stand for justice when those who oppose us are ready to silence us by any means necessary?

This has always been a challenge for Christians – for everyone. We want a long prosperous life, and we are often willing to make sacrifices to ensure that our lives *are* long and prosperous. But is one of those sacrifices to keep our mouths shut when we see others being victimized? Is one of those sacrifices to close our eyes to the exploitation of the poor from wherever in order to preserve our standard of living?

Belief in Jesus is belief in Resurrection, and belief in Resurrection is belief that God's kingdom, God's values, God's justice will prevail over all forms of injustice. That's what Jesus died for, but it's also why he lives. Jesus is alive; the hope is alive. The kingdom is at hand. May God grant us the courage to live in ways that bring it about, even when those ways place us at risk, even when those ways are confrontational and can put us in danger.