

Fowlmere Version

Having been dipping in and out of various gospels in our journey through the life and ministry of Jesus, today, and during this coming week, we will be following Mark's gospel.

Mark's gospel falls into three Acts. Act One is in Galilee. It tells about the beginning of his ministry including the building of his team; and really addresses the question, "Who is Jesus."

Act Two is "On the way to Jerusalem". It talks about what is going to happen, and why.

And then, today, we arrive at Act 3 – which is Jerusalem.

And that all sounds very neat, but Jesus' life probably wasn't that neat. This structure suggests that Jesus hadn't been to Jerusalem before but we actually know that he had – not least to celebrate the Passover each year, but there are plenty of suggestions in the other gospels that he knew Jerusalem pretty well. But this arrival in Jerusalem was different.

So, a question for you. Did any of you notice was not mentioned in our reading from Mark's this morning which I think most of us, if we had thought about it, would have expected.

Answer: Palms. Palms are only mentioned in John's gospel. Whilst we chose palms as a symbol of this great arrival, they are not specifically mentioned as much as you would think.

And now another question. What takes up the largest part of this reading today?

Answer: The donkey.

And my last question before we start looking at what is actually going on in this story. What building appears to get a cursory viewing, and then appears just to be left?

Answer: The temple.

And what the palms and the donkey and the temple represent is what is going to guide us through this reading this morning.

I don't know about you but my vision of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is of a very noisy, very busy, very exciting event where Jesus is acclaimed as the hero the Jewish nation has been waiting for. In some ways not dissimilar to our King's coronation, certainly in terms of excitement. But the more I looked into this reading this week the more I start to question that, and the more I looked at the question, "Is that really what Jesus wanted?" To me, it just seems so out of character. Yes, Jesus must by this time have got used to talking to huge crowds; as he travelled around performing miracles, healing people, even raising them for the dead, there must always have been a real buzz in the air when Jesus came into town. But is that what Jesus wanted? Is that what God wanted? Is that what happened. Let's have a look.

"As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives,"

I have never been to the Holy Land, but sometimes I think it would help me to understand what was going on in the gospels. Jesus and his disciples had just come from Jericho. Jericho is apparently the lowest city on Earth being 800 feet below sea level. Jerusalem, only a dozen or so miles away, where they were approaching, is nearly 3,000 feet above sea level. The road from one to the other goes through hot, dry desert, all the way to the top of the Mount of Olives, at which point, quite suddenly, you have at the same time the first real vegetation and the first, glorious site of Jerusalem itself. Even if you were routinely climbing this road every week for business, or whatever, there would still be a sense

of exhilaration, of delight and relief, when you get to the top. And of course in those days you would have a fantastic view of the temple.

Add to that feeling the fact that here we have a group of Jewish pilgrims coming from Galilee to Jerusalem for a festival, and their pilgrimage is almost over. They are coming to celebrate the great Jewish stories of the past, and this festival is possibly the greatest – the Passover. Back to the story.

“Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’” They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. “

So, what is going on with this donkey. There are in fact two lines of thought when it comes to the donkey. First, Jesus was a regular visitor to Jerusalem and, because he fully understood the significance of the donkey, he had arranged with the donkey owner a kind of password, so that when the donkey owner heard it he would let the donkey be used. The second thought was that this was simply another of Jesus’ miraculous interventions whereby Jesus said the word and people just let things happen according to how Jesus said. Either way are very plausible, but what we need to understand is the significance of the donkey.

Let’s start with the prophet Zechariah. The prophecies of Zechariah were written during the time when the Israelites had been exiled to Babylon, and he was preaching in the context of what was to come to restore Israel including the re-building of the temple in Jerusalem. In addition to the temple he also prophesied about the coming rules of God’s people. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The idea of a colt was well known to the Jewish people – a colt was very much a Messianic symbol – the mount of a Messiah. And what was Jesus doing – he was commandeering a beast of burden – which is the privilege of a King. And what do we know about this donkey – it has never been ridden – he was an unbroken beast, and an unbroken beast was considered to be sacred; in fact no-one else was allowed to ride the king’s horse.

The poet G K Chesterton wrote a poem called, ‘The Donkey’.

When fishes flew and forests walked

And figs grew upon thorn,

Some moment when the moon was blood

Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry

And ears like errant wings,

The devil's walking parody

On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,

Of ancient crooked will;

Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,

I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;

One far fierce hour and sweet:

There was a shout about my ears,

And palms before my feet.

The Donkey.

One other thing about the entrance. Jesus and his disciples had been pilgrims, walking to Jerusalem. If someone goes on a pilgrimage today, they don't get to the edge of their town of destination and catch the bus for the last mile. No they walk. But Jesus stopped at the edge of Jerusalem, and left the pilgrimage, and rode the donkey.

He was no longer a pilgrim. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day he claimed to be king, but he claimed to be the King of peace. When a king went to war he rode on a horse, when he came in peace he rode on a donkey.

But the people of Jerusalem misunderstood what was happening

"Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

What we see is a crowd of people thinking of kingship, in the terms of conquest, in the terms they had thought of it for so long. 150 years earlier Simon Maccabaeus entered Jerusalem after he had blasted Israel's enemies in battle, and we find this description of his arrival in the 1 Maccabees (one of those books that we find in the Apocrypha). "On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel." This was the way the Jewish people greeted their conquering heroes.

The shouts the crowd raised to Jesus showed a mixture of confusion and optimism. They wanted to welcome their conquering King.

The origin of the phrase they used is interesting. We heard earlier about Judas Maccabaeus defeating Antiocheius and how Psalm 118 was written to record this – and of course there we also find the origin of, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” – the same words that the crowd greet Jesus with as he enters Jerusalem.

Finally we get this lovely verse at the end of our reading.

“Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.”

This shows us two things about Jesus. First, at the end of several days of remarkable happenings, he simply wanted to review the situation before preparing for what was to come, so he went to a quiet place and had a think, had a look round, and then left. Second, it shows where Jesus got his strength. He went back to the peace of Bethany, the peace of just being with his disciples, with his friends, with his Father.

Most of us love a good celebration, a great party, welcoming home the traveller, jumping out and, “Surprise”. But is there enough peace in your life?

Would your first intention be like the crowds waiving those branches, which may or may not have been palms?

If you are watching something competitive on the television, perhaps a quiz programme, and they don't know the answer, are you up there shouting at the television, “Oh come on . . .”?

This week is Holy week. It is a time to make sure that you have space in your life to try and understand why what happened all those years ago, did happen. Time to try and put yourself in the place of Peter – and that denial. Time to try and work out if you were in the garden of Gethsemane would you have managed to stay awake? Time to try and think, “Would I have carried his cross?” “Would I have asked for his body?” What would I have said when the temple curtain was ripped down the middle?” And when Jesus was taken down from the cross, what would I have done next?

Try and join us on Tuesday evening when we consider what happened in that last “week” of Jesus' life – however long that week really was. Try and join us on Maundy Thursday when we remember that last meal that Jesus had with his disciples before they deserted him. Try and join us on Friday as we remember what Jesus went through for us on the cross.

But don't forget. We know the ending. We know there is a message there worth sharing. That's why we are sharing a meal on Thursday, doing Easter Crafts on Good Friday, and why we will have real celebrations next Sunday. Yes, make time to try and remember what Jesus did for us during this week, but then also what Jesus did for us, next Sunday. Try and take time to remember.

Amen