

Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024
Mark 11:1-11 - Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem

“When they were approaching Jerusalem.....” These words open our Palm Sunday gospel. Jerusalem was Jesus’ ultimate destination. Up to this point, the emphasis has been on the *message*. Now, the emphasis is on the *nature of the messenger*. Mark has drawn heavily on the Hebrew Bible in telling this part of his story. One of the Old Testament stories Mark draws on is the Succession Document found in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. This document is understood as the story of the succession of Solomon to David’s throne.

The theme of this document is stated clearly in 1 Kings: “.....who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?” David answered the question by saying that God had revealed to him that it would be Solomon. David then called for Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jahoida and told them to make preparations for a royal coronation. Solomon was to ride to the coronation on a mule! The trumpet was to blow, and when it blew the people shouted: “Long live King Solomon.” “And all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise.”

This story of Solomon’s coronation is clearly the model for the Palm Sunday event. Jesus made the entry into Jerusalem an event parallel with the story of Solomon! It was clear to everyone on hand that day what was happening. A king was ascending his throne. A coronation was in progress.

The people must have loved it! They had been waiting a thousand years for this event. And now it had come to pass. The king was here. The promise was fulfilled. The time of power and glory and triumph was at hand. The people who took part in this coronation entry into Jerusalem were filled to overflowing with hopes for this One. God had promised David that God would raise up David’s offspring after him to rule in his place. The coronation of

Solomon is the first great fulfilment of this promise of an everlasting monarchy. God made a promise. The promise has been fulfilled.

The history of God's fulfilment of this promise ran into hard times. The exile was the end of the monarchy! How would God fulfill the promise now? For the most part, Israel did not lose faith in God's promise. "Are you the one to come or are we to look for another?" Every generation of Israel raised this question. And then one day, there he was. Jesus rode into Jerusalem just like Solomon did! It is a joyous story. God's word of promise is fulfilled. It's party time!

But, we heard Jesus predict his passion three times. We know why Jesus enters Jerusalem. It is not to reign in triumph. It is to be hung on a cross. As we look forward, we encounter a mood of darkness and foreboding. Palm Sunday is, indeed, coronation Sunday! The God-promised king has come at last. This is the one we are looking for. But the world will have none of it. A king will be crowned. But the cross will be the place of coronation.

The "beloved son" is overpowered. He is condemned and murdered just as Jesus had foreseen. We learn something vitally important about God here. God does not come to overpower us. God does not come to override our human evil and impose a king upon us. God comes, rather, in the weakness of love. God is revealed in hiding. As Luther often said, God is revealed in a cross. God is revealed in death. This surely is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief!

Jesus was approaching Jerusalem from the east. The Mount of Olives is just east of the Temple. This is significant as there were two processions into Jerusalem during the Passover. The Roman army came from the west. Those with Jesus came from the east.

The Roman army was coming to maintain order during Passover, a time when the population of Jerusalem would swell from around 50,000 to well over 200,000. Moreover, Passover was a celebration of liberation from the Pharaoh in Egypt, and Rome was uneasy about its anti-imperial content and associations.

The procession of the Roman army would have been an imposing sight - Legionnaires on horseback, Roman standards flying, the Roman eagle prominently displayed, the clank of armour and beating of drums. The procession was designed to be a display of Roman imperial power. The message? Resistance is futile!

With thousands of people pouring into Jerusalem, it would have been easy to arrive inconspicuously, to simply become one of the anonymous horde. Jesus didn't do it that way. He entered Jerusalem with an inspired splash. Rome had made its demonstration of power from the west. Jesus would stage a counter-demonstration from the east. He would come from "the opposite direction."

Jesus comes to the city not in a powerful way, like the Roman army, but in a ludicrously humble way. He incites not fear, as in the Roman procession, but cheering crowds who clear his way and hail his presence. The procession of Jesus brilliantly mocks the Roman procession. Sarcasm and irony are often the only mechanisms available for the oppressed to express themselves.

Just before Jesus makes his final approach to Jerusalem, he sends two disciples into a village - not Jerusalem, but a nearby village. This is no accident. The Jesus movement is a movement of peasants who mostly reside in small villages. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is never in a particularly large town until now, the final week of his life.

In Mark, the largest "city" visited by Jesus - he may even have lived there - was Capernaum, with a population of perhaps only 5,000 at the most. He spent most of his time in the countryside and the small villages. Some of Jesus' followers cut "leafy branches out of the fields," another indication of his connection with agricultural peasants.

Two disciples are instructed to go into the village and, upon arriving, they would see a colt. They are to take this colt and, if anyone asks them about it, they are to give the "secret password": "The Lord needs it and will return it immediately." Sure enough, they go into town, see the colt, take it, and are interrogated. They say the magic words, and they are left to go on their way. It appears there was a network of Jesus supporters operating "under the radar." The people in the village who question the two disciples appear to be in on whatever is going on. The Galilee-based Jesus movement reaches even into Judea, even to the very gates of the city of Jerusalem itself!

And they brought the colt to Jesus and they threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many people spread their cloaks into the road, others cut off leafy branches out of the fields. The crowd, by strewing cloaks onto his path, is treating the humble, donkey-riding, egalitarian Jesus as true royalty. Royal power is not with hierarchical and oppressive Rome, but with the "one who comes in the name of the Lord." The crowd hails Jesus and compares him to the greatest royal figure in Israel's history, King David the Great.

The ones leading forth and the ones following cried out, 'Hosanna! Blessed (is) the one coming in the name of the Lord! Blessed (is) the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!' Jesus was not welcomed by the people of Jerusalem.

These crowds were not composed of Jerusalem city dwellers, but rather "the ones leading forth" and "the ones following." Most likely, this refers to the

disciples and those who joined the movement along the way to Jerusalem.

This crowd is enthusiastic, shouting "hosanna" to the "coming kingdom of our father David." The crowd seems to be imagining for Jesus the kind of kingdom now held in hallowed memory, the Golden Age of David, a time of prosperity, and a time of military power and territorial expansion. But, Jesus is not committed to a path of "glory," as in a Davidic-style kingdom, but rather a path of defeat. He will not reign from a palace, but from a cross.

The crowds yelling "hosanna!" are on the outside of the city. It is only after the crowd hails him that Jesus actually enters the city. When he does, he goes directly to the Temple, "...he entered into Jerusalem and into the Temple..." whereupon he does ... what? He "looked around at all." Then he left. Jesus will make three forays to the Temple in Mark's gospel, of which this one is the first. Given all the hoopla leading up to it, one might have expected something different.

One might have expected, that Jesus might storm the Temple and take it by force. Instead, he confronted the Temple, and while there, he saw everything - he "looked around at all." In "seeing all," Mark wants us to know that Jesus saw the Temple's corruption and its complicity in Roman power.

So what was the "all" that Jesus saw. Now this temple was no corner church or even cathedral. The temple stood as a sign of the need for victim sacrifice. Every day, it offered public and private sacrifice for the good of society. It was the supreme religious and political institution in Judea at the time of Jesus.

It overshadowed Jerusalem and dominated life in the city. Eighty percent of the employment in Jerusalem depended on the temple, not only on its day-to-day ritual needs , but also on the periodic pilgrim festivals and the ongoing building project it constituted. Nine thousand priests and Levites worked

there, although not at the same time, operating what was in fact a giant abattoir. The twice-daily sacrifices on the vast ever-burning altar consumed thousands of animals and forests of wood. There were cattle pens on the north side and sometimes the water of the Kidron stream where the blood was flushed became so thick that it was sold to farmers as fertilizer.

Over it hung a pall of smoke from burning flesh, and when the great pilgrim festivals, like Passover, were in full swing, the priests stood in blood, sacrificing the victims of private offerings. Jews were expected to make the pilgrimage to the temple three times a year - twice in Spring - Passover and Pentecost - and once in fall at Succoth or Festival of Booths. Jerusalem thrived on what today would be called convention business.

This combination of smoke, blood, and business, and priests who were in league with Roman power to preserve their office and landed interests, was the historical reality of the Temple system.

This is what Jesus saw - perhaps this is why he didn't stay that first day in Jerusalem. He returned to home base set up on Mount of Olives, possibly to think and plan his response to what he had observed in the not so Holy City.

Jesus returns three times to challenge the authority, creating conflict between himself and the religious, legal, and political representatives. Jesus' entry was all about the temple, and not Jerusalem in general. He is the victim coming to the place of sacrifice.

Perhaps the most notable thing about Mark's version of this story is how anti-climactic it is. All the excitement of the parade, the crowds chanting, the road strewn with coats and branches – it all leads up to, well, nothing. Jesus looks around, and then goes back. Whatever the disciples expected to happen, and whatever the crowds expected, just didn't happen. Their

expectations and Jesus' agenda are worlds apart.

Their agenda is a revolution that will sweep away one empire and replace it with - a new empire. Jesus' agenda is a revolution that will replace empires altogether with a humanity in which everyone is included. Their agenda is to co-opt God to legitimatize their vision of Utopia. Jesus' agenda is to realize the divine image that lives in every person. So, at the end of the day, after all the excitement ... nothing happens. The expectations are utterly unmet. This is indeed the beginning of the end, where the unmet false expectations turn the crowd's adulation to disappointment, and finally to bloodthirsty anger.

It's fine to have great expectations. But what happens when your expectations go unmet? Do you turn to thoughts and actions of vengeance, or do you consider whether your expectations were what they should have been to begin with?

As Jesus' final week moves ahead, we find Jesus making broad, increasingly public and controversial demonstrations in the big city of Jerusalem in the middle of Passover. Jesus probably did not want to die, but his passion for justice and his anger at injustice - a passion and anger he inherited from the Hebrew prophets before him - led him to take increasingly large risks to show the contrast between the status quo where Herod was king, and the kingdom of God. These risky acts of nonviolent activism led directly to Jesus' tragic martyrdom.

This is not to say that following Jesus necessarily means we will die a tragic death. There are those like Francis of Assisi, Clarence Jordan, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa who followed Jesus in radical, controversial ways and died of old age.

But there are also those like Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich

Boenhofer, and Gandhi who, like Jesus, were killed when they risked following Jesus' way.

Rosa Parks is an imitator of Christ, not because she suffered for taking her stand, but because she had the courage to believe in her own dignity and fought for it in spite of the conflict that resulted. Nelson Mandela is an imitator of Christ, not because he suffered in prison, but because he held out for peace and injustice, and led a nation to resurrection. In each case it is not the suffering that is redemptive, but the courage to pursue justice in the face of pain and evil.

The word spoken to us by the “beloved son” who rides in the Palm Sunday parade is not a word that calls us to join him in celebration. Ultimately, the word of the “Palm Sunday God” goes something like this: “I have not come as a Mighty God to meet you in your strength. I have come as a Crucified God to meet you in your weakness. I have come to meet you at the depth of your human suffering. I have come to meet you when you walk in the valley of the shadow of death. I have come to meet you when you stand at the very gates of hell. I have come to walk with you in your darkness. I have come to walk with you in the night, that you might one day walk with me in the light.”

This Holy Week, may Mark’s story of Jesus continue to haunt us, to challenge us, and to inspire us as we discern how God is calling us — today, in our time and place — to follow the Jesus’ risky way of nonviolent activism, loving-kindness, and gracious compassion.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR PALM SUNDAY - MARCH 24, 2024

In this holy week that begins with the joyous celebration of Palm Sunday, we give thanks for our freedom to celebrate this joyful solemnity. But Lord, we think of those who hear of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then hear about the wonders of the resurrection at Easter, but never hear or feel the impact of the story of Jesus' passion: his violent death by torture on a cross, and that he did it all for us; for "me."

Caught between joy and despair, we yearn for the fulfillment of God's desire for a world and Creation where all experience wholeness, beyond the brokenness and neediness of this life. We offer thanksgiving for God's steadfast presence with us as we bring our petitions and prayers for the transformation of the church and the world.

We pray for the church, for all Christians everywhere, for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, for all pastors and lay workers and leaders, musicians, missionaries, and diaconal ministers. Today we lift up Living Faith Lutheran in Sechelt - Pastors. Richard Hergesheimer (Interim), and Pr. Glenn Inglis (United), Lord of Life Mission in Sandspit - Pr. Jim Whaley (Interim), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Bless the Jewish people as they celebrate Passover, and grant that the religions of the world may grow in mutual understanding and respect.

We pray for world leaders, who oftentimes seem quick to stand in the limelight for political gain or posturing, making decisions which affect everyone in the world but are slow at times to do the steady, less glamorous work to which they are called. We pray for world leaders to understand their role to serve the peoples of the world. We pray that you would lead them to have the personal and political courage to commit to practical actions to make a positive and lasting difference for the sake of our world and for future generations. May those who lead the nations of the world be given wisdom.

We pray for all people, for places where there is war or famine, especially the people of Ukraine, the people of Gaza, the people of Sudan suffering from famine with a million people at risk of starvation, the people of Haiti suppressed and suffering under the ongoing effects of gang violence and an unstable government. Support peacekeeping talks and the humanitarian efforts to bring an end to these atrocities. Provide the necessary resources to support the efforts of countries and NGOs to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and care for those who are marginalized and the poor.

We pray for the regions of the world where extreme climate events are harming the lives of people and your natural Creation. Consumerism, corporate greed, and political decisions are doing violence to the climate, to the land, to the waters and oceans. Open our eyes to opportunities to reduce our own carbon footprint and to be better stewards of all we have been given. We pray for the people of Chile, where wildfires are burning out of control in three national parks while the Atacama desert experiences unprecedented flooding. We pray for the people of Iceland impacted by the new active volcanic eruption. Too often, in too many countries, on too many continents, we have heard of untold disruption to lives, increased violence and long term hardships in the cumulative aftermath.

In days when food banks and social services are increasingly required in our country to feed families who struggle to provide the basics for life, we ask that you will re-arrange our priorities and help us to love and care for our neighbour. God our Creator, help everyone to share all the good gifts that you have given to us.

We pray for all in need, for the ill, for those in hospital, for those undergoing treatment, for the lonely, the homeless, those battling substance abuse and those suffering with emotional or mental illness. Compassionate God, we trust that you are present in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Give your strength, comfort and healing power to all those in need of healing and compassion. And bless all those who are providing support and care to others.

We remember all those who have died. God of hope, we thank you that not even death can separate us from your love. We pray for all who mourn, that they may feel your presence and loving care for them.

We pray for our community and for all who live and work in this region. God our friend, we pray for our families and friends. May we be willing and able to help each other just as you love and help us.

We pray for ourselves and all that we will experience during this Holy Week, and all those we will meet. Teach us to walk the way of the cross, that we may be a community of forgiveness and mercy. Loving God, we give this week into your hands. May we reflect on what this Holy Week means for our lives and learn and grow in it.

We pray all this, and whatever else is on our hearts, in the name of the One who gave his life for our sake - Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray ...

Our Father ...