

Scripture for Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021

Zechariah 9: 9-10

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! *See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* ¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. *He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

Mark 11:1-11

¹¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The *Lord* needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people *spread their cloaks on the road*, while others *spread branches they had cut in the fields*. ⁹ 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!”

¹¹ 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.

Sermon: “The King is Coming!”

“Are we nearly there yet?” Any parent on a road trip or on a hike will be familiar with those words! And we usually respond with encouragement, saying “Yes, we’ll soon be there” or “It’s not long now.” Mark’s gospel is a similar journey and the climax is coming soon, it’s not long now. But that pinnacle is not what the disciples - nor Mark’s readers - were expecting. In his opening statement Mark tells us he is relating “the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” And a little later he says that after John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus began proclaiming “The time has come, *the kingdom of God has come near*.”¹ So the obvious question is, “*When* will God’s kingdom *actually* come?” It’s not long now. Later, in Mark chapter 8, Peter declares to Jesus, “You *are* the Messiah!”² Peter makes that bold connection – even if he was unsure what it meant. Curiously, Jesus then sternly ordered his disciples *not* to tell anyone about his true identity.³ So another obvious question in their minds would be: “*When* will Jesus’ *messiahship* be revealed or become evident to all?” The answers to those questions will be unveiled in Jerusalem during Passover week. And they won’t be like anyone anticipated!

The journey from Jericho⁴ to Jerusalem is a steady, uphill climb, as Jericho is 800 feet *below* sea level and Jerusalem is 3000 feet *above* sea level; the distance between them is about 25km. The road goes through hot, dry desert all the way to the top of the Mount of Olives,⁵ at which point, quite suddenly, the travellers would see vegetation and the first glorious sight of Jerusalem itself, with, of course, its Temple. If we were Jewish pilgrims coming to celebrate Passover, then there would be an added sense of excitement; we can see it, we’re nearly there! And that joy is also because Passover is a time that celebrates great hope of freedom as people remember and relive the story of God’s rescue from slavery in Egypt. Since Roman oppression is their current lot, Passover is also a time of nationalistic hope, as well as a prayer that God will rescue Israel once more.

It is no coincidence that Jesus chose to come to Jerusalem in time for *this* festival. That becomes evident in the way Mark relates the story of how Jesus gets a donkey to ride on.⁶ There is more detail about that than the actual entry into Jerusalem! And that’s a bit of staged theatre⁷ in itself, because Jesus has *walked* all the way from Galilee, so *why* now ride a donkey for the last two miles? I’ll comment on that in a moment. You remember what happens. He tells two of his disciples to go into the village ahead, indicating the precise location where they can find a colt, one that has never been ridden,⁸ and they

¹ Mark 1:14-15.

² Mark 8:29b.

³ Mark 8:30.

⁴ See Mark 10:46, where Jesus meets and heals “blind Bartimaeus,” who refers to Jesus as “Son of David.”

⁵ See also Zech 14:4; “on that day” The LORD will stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies to the *east* of Jerusalem.

⁶ Matt 21:2 informs us it was a donkey. If all we had were Mark’s and Luke’s accounts, we wouldn’t know that since the ambiguous Greek word for “colt” could equally mean a young horse.

⁷ Or, perhaps, political satire! (After all, Jesus comes humbly on young donkey, not a war horse . . .)

⁸ Barclay suggests this is fitting as the colt was being used for a *sacred* purpose (cf. an *unblemished* lamb or a never-yoked heifer; Num 19:2; Deut 21:3; 1 Sam 6:7). This speaks to Jesus’ authority. Note: Romans would simply requisition animals and

are to untie it and bring it to Jesus.⁹ The fact that Jesus knows where the colt will be suggests that everything is happening under the guidance of an unseen hand whose aims are in perfect harmony with those of Jesus.¹⁰ This is important. Mark is reassuring *his readers* that *all* that is about to happen in Jerusalem is *not* accidental, even if it is not what they expect.

So, why *does* Jesus ride that last section on a donkey? Mark does not mention any Old Testament texts, but their presence is always there in the background - and Mark's discerning Jewish audience would have understood those connections. For example, we were reminded of an Old Testament echo with our reading from Zechariah saying, "Your *king* comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of the donkey."¹¹ Matthew and John cite that oracle in their accounts to make that explicit connection for their readers.¹² Jesus' riding on a donkey is therefore *provocative*; he is *deliberately enacting* that prophecy. You see, popular Jewish expectation at the time was of a Messiah as a *political* savior, a *king* who would usher in God's reign and vindicate Israel to the onlooking world. With this action, then, expectations are heightened. The Messiah is now being *revealed*; the kingdom of God is *at hand*. "We're nearly there!" Jesus is no longer being secretive, for his hour had come.¹³

In case the reader fails to join those faint dots, Mark then says the disciples threw their cloaks over the donkey, like a makeshift throne. Others put their own cloaks on the road,¹⁴ long with leafy branches¹⁵ from the nearby fields, so providing the red-carpet treatment. This behaviour is also mentioned in the Old Testament as the appropriate way to welcome a king. Moreover, pilgrims sang as they approached Jerusalem for Passover. We heard the words they used from Psalm 118 in our *Call to Worship*.¹⁶ "Hosanna" means literally "God save me" and is a Hebrew word that mixes exuberant praise to God with a prayer that God will rescue his people, and do so right away. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD" is straight from Psalm 118:24 - and pilgrims sang this *every* Passover. However, "Blessed is the *coming kingdom* of our ancestor *David*" is *not* from the Psalms. Mark is therefore

human labor. But in Jesus' case, he promises to *return* it to the house shortly. This distinguishes himself from the oppressive ruling forces.

⁹ Mark 11:3, Jesus says, "The Lord needs it." Scholars debate the sense Mark is using "Lord" here. Does it mean "God needs it?" which is how Mark often uses "Lord" elsewhere (see Mark 5:19-20, and when citing Old Testament texts). Or is this a Christological title pointing to Jesus as "Lord," as in Mark 2:28; 12:37; 13:35. The ambiguity may be deliberate!

¹⁰ Mark presents Jesus as a prophet with foresight. Moreover, Jesus is *not* a "victim" of upcoming events.

¹¹ Zech 9:9-10.

¹² See Matt 21:5; John 12:15. Perhaps the political context of Mark's own day made him a little cagey in what he wrote. We don't really know, but we can make reasonable inferences within the context of his whole gospel account. He was, after all, writing was around the time of another revolt that led to the destruction of Jerusalem - including the Temple in AD 70.

¹³ Note that in Luke's version of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he presents Jesus as pausing on the Mount of Olives and lamenting over the city (Luke 19:41-44). As he wept, Jesus said: "If you had *only* recognized *on this day* the things that make for *peace*!" If they had recognised Jesus as the Messiah, perhaps the temple would not have been destroyed. (Luke writes post AD 70, which is clear in the subsequent verses.) Jesus came in peace to bring peace, but he is no push-over.

¹⁴ See 2 Kings 9:13.

¹⁵ Only John says they are *palm* branches (John 12:13)! See also 1 Macc 13:50-51; 2 Macc 10:7; Even so, Jesus did not come as a military conqueror, but in peace.

¹⁶ See Ps 118:24-27. Mark 11:9-10. See also Matt 21:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13.

interpreting the drama and revealing the praise and expectations of those followers of Jesus.¹⁷ And just in case we are not sure about this allusion, Mark has Bartimaeus repeatedly shouting “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” at the very end of the previous chapter.¹⁸ The royal identity of Jesus is made clear: “The King is coming.” And we are following the procession, along with Bartimaeus who was healed of his blindness, to see what happens next “on the way.”¹⁹

The stage is now all set. Yet, ironically, Mark’s Jesus does not do what his readers would expect. After the procession, with its songs, cloaks, and branches, all Jesus does is enter Jerusalem, pay a quick visit to the Temple to look it over²⁰ and leave to go back to Bethany - 3 km away - with the twelve disciples.²¹ What an anticlimax! Jesus acted more like a tourist rather than someone exercising royal prerogatives. Perhaps what this illustrates is that Mark uses this literary strategy to say two things at once to his readers: Yes, this *is* the Messiah, the son of David, and, yes, he will *save* you but, *no*, it doesn’t mean all that you thought it meant! His “kingship” means something different; he will not rescue you in the way you expect. Mark’s distinct *lack* of drama when Jesus enters the Temple therefore *subverts* the expectations of the people and his readers. There is no cleansing of the Temple on that day, as in Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts.²² Mark’s finale is a bit of a whimper.

What this does is alert the reader to expect to see Jesus *redefine* Messiahship, kingship, and what the coming of the kingdom of God means. Over the next few days, Mark will relate what all that looks like. The events of Jesus in Jerusalem will be the most politically and religiously explosive acts that Jesus does in his ministry. He begins by cursing a fruitless fig tree, even though it wasn’t the season for figs!²³ He then purges the Temple of its money-changers; I talked about that a couple of weeks ago.²⁴ Jesus therefore behaves like a prophetic reformer. Jesus teaches in temple forecourt, and not only is his authority challenged by the religious elite, they come with trick questions.²⁵ He also watches as people give their money, and discerns that the poor widow has given all she has, while the rich give large quantities of money - but it hardly dents their wealth.²⁶ All in all, Jesus is judging the religious leaders not just for their corrupt practices, but for their failure to recognise the Messiah.²⁷ It’s no surprise that

¹⁷ Incidentally, we don’t know how big this crowd was. John 12:12-13 indicates the crowd came *out* of Jerusalem to greet Jesus and accompany him into the city. (This is symbolic of how a victorious king was welcomed; cf. Greek: *parousia*.) The other gospels suggest the crowds were followers of Jesus, perhaps together with other pilgrims coming to the city.

¹⁸ See Mark 10:46-52. And Jesus was merciful to him and healed his blindness.

¹⁹ See Mark 10:52.

²⁰ Mark’s Jesus had not visited Jerusalem before.

²¹ Mark 11:11. Bethany is a village just east of Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives and from where he borrowed – and presumably returned - the donkey. (See [7].)

²² Matt 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48. (On the way to Jerusalem, Luke has Jesus weeping over the city, Luke 19:41-44.)

²³ See Mark 11:12-14, 20-15; 13:28-31. This is likely symbolically related to the destruction of the Temple itself.

²⁴ Mark 11:15-19. See also: <https://securerusercontent.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Gods-Presence-is-Where.pdf> .

²⁵ See Mark 11:27-33; 12:13-37.

²⁶ Mark 12:41-44.

²⁷ See Mark 11:27 – 12:12; 12:35-40.

the chief priests and the experts of the Jewish scriptures then decide that enough is enough, and so they plot to kill Jesus.²⁸

Incidentally, it's also thought that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because he finally realised that Jesus was not the *kind* of Messiah he had anticipated. And he was not the only one with that misconception. Just before the Bartimaeus story, Mark relates that mother of the disciples James and John had great ambitions for her sons. She wanted them to sit at Christ's right and left when his kingdom came.²⁹ Jesus responds: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and *to give his life a ransom for many.*"³⁰ Jesus comes to pay with his life the price to release everyone who is enslaved to sin. That's the *kind* of *Messiah* that will be revealed in Jerusalem. That is what will happen in just outside of the city on Good Friday. Today, when we celebrate Jesus first entering Jerusalem as its rightful king, he comes humbly on a donkey to *serve*, and not to 'lord' it over people like their present leaders. In John's gospel, this is modelled by Jesus washing the disciple's feet.³¹ This is the *kind* of *kingdom* that Jesus is proclaiming and inaugurating through the events of Easter.

The question today is, what kind of Jesus are *we* expecting? And, what kind of kingdom are *we* anticipating? Throughout church history - at least since Emperor Constantine - the worldwide Church has been associated with power, pomp, and ceremony. This is demonstrated in grand cathedrals, glittering robes, and wealth. The influence of the Church in the West is now waning, and if that's the public perception of the Church, then I say it's no bad thing. Contrast that grand image with Jesus riding on a donkey, or washing the disciple's feet. I can fully appreciate that this can be uncomfortable for some. Yet for others, the servant Jesus, the one who understands suffering from personal experience, is very appealing.

Easter Week is a time to humbly reflect on how we might be misunderstanding Jesus and his message, for whatever reason. It's also a time to reflect on our love for Jesus and the depth of his love for us. Like the Passover travellers, we too are pilgrims. I invite us this Holy week, of all the weeks in the Christian calendar, to journey with Jesus. To help with that pilgrimage, I have put the daily lectionary readings on the back of bulletin. Please take it home and take 10 minutes each day to read the texts, especially those from John's gospel. And as you do, ask God's Spirit to illuminate your spirit - and receive and be refreshed. Jesus wants to journey with us *every* day, not just to leap from Sunday to Sunday. As we prepare for the week ahead, let us include Jesus, and walk the journey with him from Palm Sunday through Good Friday and beyond. Amen.

²⁸ Mark 14:1-2; 10-11.

²⁹ See Mark 10:35-45.

³⁰ Mark 10:44-45. The "ransom" here is a secular metaphor for the price needed to pay to liberate a slave – those in bondage.

³¹ See John 13:1-17.