

Lastly, it cannot have escaped your notice that here, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus accepted open affirmation from others that He was God's Messiah. Those who welcomed Him as Messiah knew that this was what they were doing, and Jesus certainly knew what they were expecting of Him. However, for most of His ministry he had kept people quiet, preventing people from becoming over-expectant. He had also taught the disciples about what to expect and they had not understood what He said about His death and resurrection, so how could other people be expected to understand? But now the time had come for everything to be fulfilled and it was no longer necessary to hide who He was. Previously, it had been imperative for Jesus to prevent people from expecting a salvation which was not what they had expected, but now He had come to complete His work, and His focus was no longer on the people and their expectations but on what He was called to do.

Application

There is a certain amount of misunderstanding floating around the church about Palm Sunday and what it means. The best way we can celebrate it is to use it as a festival which celebrates Jesus' coming in peace as a servant of God to do His will. We can shout in joy and celebration, praise God for His salvation, shout 'hosanna', and process, even with donkeys. However, we must do this with the knowledge that the praise we offer is given to One who has come amongst us to die so that our sins might be forgiven and we might be redeemed. Our shouts of joy are tempered by the knowledge that with Palm Sunday coming immediately before Holy Week and Easter Sunday, we will not raise our voices in joy again until we celebrate our Lord's resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. The cycle of Palm Sunday and Holy Week can appear to some to be a rather inexact way of representing Jesus' last days, but it is the closest thing we have to what happened. Moreover, the tension of praise tempered by the knowledge of suffering is something which we should accept as the season of Lent comes to its close.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, He 'went into the Temple ... looked around at everything ... and went out to Bethany with the Twelve' (11:11). With these few words, Mark paints a picture of Jesus not so much as lonely but as purposeful. Not everything could be done in one day. Our lives are now dependent upon Jesus' strength of will to see through to the end the calling He had been given. His exclusive sense of purpose and dedication to God's will remains an example to us. Jesus alone was the Messiah, but if we follow Him, we can learn from every aspect of His life, including His sense of purpose in the midst of the most demanding of circumstances.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group how your own church celebrates Palm Sunday. What can you learn from this text about how it should be celebrated?
2. Read through the prophecies in Zechariah 9 and 12 in order to make sense of what they say and how they affect this text.
3. Is it right for us to expect God to come, like a 'Messiah' to sort out our own mess? Should we not take responsibility for what we have done in the world?

Discipleship

How important is Palm Sunday to you? Make a list of the special events in the life of your church and ask yourself whether these are a suitable way of celebrating the life of Christ. Some churches will base their routine around special events like Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost etc.; and others, on special services, missions and anniversaries. What is the best way to celebrate the ministry and life of Christ?

Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for all the wonderful things of life. We praise You for the way in which we are brought through difficult struggles by the power of Your salvation; and we praise You for the redemption of our souls by which we may be sure of our victory over sin. Praise You, Lord God for Your salvation. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you are always with us when we are awake and asleep, when we do our work and when we rest, when we remember you and when our minds are filled with a thousand thoughts. Be so close to us that even when we are not directly aware of you, our thoughts, words and deeds become the product of our walking with You. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Self and Sin

Pray today about the way in which evil tempts people to the sins of selfishness, lust and greed. Pray against these evils in society and also where they have crept into the life of God's people. Pray also for your own protection from these sins, and the protection of your whole family, and ask the Lord to show His people how to live lives that are a demonstration of purity and service.

Meditation

The Lord sees what we do, and helps us if we let Him;

When we don't know if we've done what's right,
He will show us how to walk in His ways.

The Lord hears our speech, and helps us if we let Him;

When we come close to unworthy words,
He will take them swiftly from our mouths.

The Lord sees our thoughts, and helps us if we let Him;

When we are tempted by evil and sin,
He will break the powers which seek our souls.

The Lord feels our feelings, and helps us if we let Him;

When we are stressed by anguish and fear,
He will revive our hope by the power of His love.

The Lord sees our future, and helps us if we let Him;

When we fail to understand His plans for us,
He will show us His glory, and our place in His heart!

Bible Study - Mark 11:1-11

¹ When they came near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples ² with these instructions, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as soon as you go into it, you will find ³ a colt tethered there which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'why are you doing this?' answer, 'the Master needs it, and will return it here shortly.'⁴ They left, found the colt tethered out on the street by a gateway, and untied it. ⁵ Some of those who were standing there said to them, 'What are you doing untying the colt?' ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said and they gave them permission. ⁷ They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, and He sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road and other spread leafy branches cut from the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed all shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!' ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Review

We know this story of Jesus well because it is traditionally read on the Sunday before Easter, and we have used the scene of the branches waived in Jesus' honour to call this Sunday 'Palm Sunday'. The celebrations held in some parts of the world can be impressive; people ride on donkeys, make and wave 'palm' branches, and sing great songs and hymns of praise to God,

all in the midst of the solemn church season of Lent, all of which focuses on the coming death of our Lord on Good Friday. Many of the details of the festival are hard to pin down, because if you read all the four Gospel versions of this occasion (also Matt 21:1-11, Luke 19:28-40, and John 12:12-19), they all disagree on some of the basic details of the story. For example, the description of what was done with the branches and clothes is different in each Gospel, and they also disagree about whether there was one donkey or two!

It is undeniable that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is an event of awesome mystery, and we cannot escape the apparent contradictions of what happened; Jesus came to fulfil Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah as God's suffering servant (e.g. Isaiah 53). However, although the people of His own day did not fully understand this, He nevertheless accepted the praises of the Jewish people despite their misunderstanding. As He entered the greatly loved city of God's dwelling, Jerusalem, it would only be a short time before He was condemned to death, and killed outside its walls as a mere insurrectionist and thief.

The whole story of what happened is enwrapped with mystery and intrigue, and no amount of analysis can reduce what happened to some dry list of 'facts'. We must take the account Mark has given us and find out what God has to say to us through it; and it will be different from what can be found within the other Gospels because the emphases of his Gospel are different from the others. What is beyond dispute is that Jesus arrived at Jerusalem and entered riding on a donkey selected from a nearby village, to the cheers of the disciples and a welcoming crowd. However, once He had entered the city, the four Gospels all disagree about what He did next; for example, Matthew says He went to straightway to the Temple (Matt 21:12f.), yet Mark tells us that he looked around the city and then went to stay with His disciples in nearby Bethany.

Two great prophecies from Zechariah were fulfilled on that day. Firstly, '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' (Zech. 9:9); and secondly, 'on that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the East ...' (Zech 14:4). These are not generally familiar to people today, but in Jesus' day they were well known prophecies about God's Messiah. For this reason, the opening verses of our passage and the following story about how Jesus obtained a donkey were vital; Mark's first readers would have recognised what was happening immediately. Much of the rest of Mark's description of the entry into Jerusalem was familiar to people not because of Scripture, but because these celebrations were typical of Passover celebrations in Jerusalem (as we will see in our later study).

Despite all the explanations, the sense of mysterious awe about the whole event persists. This was the very Son of God coming to the earthly city of His own people in order to fulfil His Father's will and die for the salvation of all. Ever since, as we sing hymns of praise on Palm Sunday, we feel the great spiritual tension of offering praises to Jesus knowing that it will not be long before we have to face the fact that the crowd's shouts of 'Hosanna' soon turned to 'crucify' (15:14); but this was the path our Lord had to follow.

Going Deeper

The fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies was not something to be regarded lightly, at least as far as Mark was concerned. This was the way that Mark, as an evangelist, could verify His belief that Jesus was the Messiah, and it is important for us to understand something of the background to these prophecies. It is also important for us to understand what was going on when the people greeted Jesus, and why the authorities did not appear to respond. Both they and Jesus were entering the final stages of their confrontation.

The arrival in Jerusalem

The prophecies of Zechariah were very important to the people of Israel in Jesus' day. When Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in around 587 BC, many people thought that the end had come for God's people, but the prophets and some priests (such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel and others) worked hard to rebuild the Temple. However, one other essential feature of God's authoritative rule in Jerusalem was missing, which was a descendant of David sitting 'on the throne'. Many could claim descent from this great ancient King, but the last of the royal line had been taken to Babylon from where they were either killed or not heard of again (see 2 Chron 36:9f.). It was the prophets who helped God's people make sense of what had happened; Ezekiel prophesied about a glorious new temple (Ez 40f.), Isaiah prophesied about a new king who would be a 'servant' of God (Isaiah 40-53) and Zechariah

prophesied about a prince of 'peace' (Zech 8:12f. 9:10) and a 'shepherd' (Zech 11:4f.) who would have victory over worldly authorities and powers.

The prophecies from Zechariah quoted above are significant because they speak of the victory of peace and justice which God alone can bring (e.g. Zech 9:15,16). It is wrong for us to think that all the people in Jesus' day did not understand the idea of a Messiah as a 'prince of peace' according to such prophecies. Too often, preachers report the suggestion that the Jews wanted a war-like Messiah who would destroy Israel's enemies; and that may have been true for some, but many Jewish people were more measured. What the Jewish people did expect was that the Messiah would come with great signs and wonders 'in the heavens', and that God would quickly and immediately subdue the earthly authorities and powers by heavenly means which would be visible on earth. The prophecy from Zechariah which speaks of the Messiah coming into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech 9:9 – above) encapsulates this hope, for kings did indeed ride on donkeys, and this king and Messiah was expected to be a man of peace. Moreover, the second prophecy from Zechariah about the Messiah standing on the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4 – above) was about God fighting on behalf of His people, with the Messiah standing over Jerusalem in authority to protect His people while God defeated their enemies. It was because of these prophecies that the people around Jesus did not necessarily expect a war-like Messiah; they simply did not understand how all this would actually happen.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, He fulfilled these prophecies which were fully expected of the Messiah. People have debated for years about how Jesus arranged for the donkey to be acquired from a nearby village, and modern commentators have poured over the ethical problems raised by Jesus taking a donkey in the way He did (11:2-5). This was all irrelevant to Mark. If Jesus had made some prior arrangement or if He had simply called on the disciples to commandeer the donkey, we will never know. For the purposes of the Gospel it was simply necessary to demonstrate that Jesus sat on a young untrained 'colt' or a donkey, according to Zechariah 9:9. The story about the donkey's acquisition simply demonstrated Jesus' absolute authority as Messiah.

The entry into Jerusalem.

Contrary to popular opinion today, whilst the first part of the story is clearly related to specific prophecies in Zechariah, the mode of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not the fulfilment of prophecy. The idea of spreading cloaks over the donkey (11:7) and the road (11:8), and waving leafy branches (11:8) is not found in the Old Testament, and neither is the word 'Hosanna' a normal Hebrew word from the Old Testament. The 'entry into Jerusalem' is the only place it is found in the Bible! The phrase 'blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord' comes from Psalm 118:26, and this is a clue to the origins of this form of celebration.

Research into Jewish practice in Jesus' day has shown that what happened during Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was similar to some of the events which took place at the Feast of Dedication, or 'Hannukah'. In Jesus' day, this feast celebrated the purification of Jerusalem and the Temple in 166BC, when Judas Maccabeus won back Jerusalem from Greek occupiers who had polluted the Temple with the worship of Greek gods whilst they had occupied Jerusalem. The ceremony of purification was performed with candles lit in the Temple, which is the origin of Hannukah as a 'festival of lights' (reflected in Jesus' words 'I am the light of the world' - John 8:12,11:9,10 etc). A number of other features of this celebration were taken from ancient festivals, including some from the Old Testament 'festival of booths' (Leviticus 23:34f.) which included the ritual recitation of the 'Hallel', the cycle of psalms from 113 to 118 (which includes the quote above from psalm 118:26, see Mark 11:9). As part of this event, the Jewish people also celebrated Judas Maccabeus' victorious entry into Jerusalem with a procession which included shouts of 'Hosanna' along with the waving of branches gathered outside Jerusalem in the countryside. This word is a combination of two Hebrew words "Hos'ah – nah" from Psalm 118:25 meaning 'save us!'; however, it developed over time into a shout of praise to God, used at this procession at the Feast of Dedication.

For all these reasons, it is possible Jesus entered Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication, and if not then, the people who welcomed Him used the same characteristic features of the Festival. They welcomed Him as a coming Messiah who would purify the Temple and bring God's Holy rule, just as Judas Maccabeus had done two centuries previously. All the waving of branches and shouts of joy were acts of genuine hope and joy for those who were there. They expected great things from their Messiah.