

The Triumphal Entry – Mark 11:1-11

Do you know what a Jalapeno pepper is? Of course you do. So I can assume you know that they are hot – as in spicy hot. How did you learn this? Someone told you? You sampled a little piece, or had it in some baked pasta? Or did you learn the hard way, like I had to?

Lise and I were out with friends at a Mexican restaurant many years ago, and on the side of the plate there were these green vegetables. To be honest, I had no idea what they were. Lise and our friends explained that they were jalapeno peppers and they were really hot. They suggested I should just leave them alone, and just send them back on my plate.

That sounded like a challenge to me, so I bit into one and started to chew. That wasn't near as bad as they made it out to be. Yeah, it had flavour but nothing too bad. I took a second bite, and now the flavour hit me. I could feel the heat rising through my body and I am sure my face went beet red. My eyes started to water and my throat burned. I grabbed my glass of water and downed it in one gulp, and quickly asked for more. That is when they told me water does not help. They were right. By the time they brought me some bread I was sweating, and I am sure I could breathe fire. It was as bad as they said it was...

As we have read through the Gospel of Mark we have been on a journey with Jesus. Most of Jesus' ministry has been in Galilee, over 150 km from Jerusalem. After about two years of ministry there, Jesus started to tell his disciples he would go to Jerusalem and there he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten and killed; and on the third day he would rise.

The disciples cannot understand what he is saying. Surely a man with the powers Jesus had would not be killed. Jesus only helped people. True, the spies from Jerusalem's religious orders did not seem to like Jesus much, but kill him? Things really cannot be that bad...

So as Jesus makes his way towards Jerusalem the disciples discuss among themselves what Jesus meant – what dying meant, what rising from the dead meant. And who was this "Son of Man" Jesus kept talking about?

In today's passage we find Jesus arriving in Jerusalem. The disciples might have been a little apprehensive about going. In John's Gospel it is Thomas who says, "Let us go and die with him" when Jesus suggests they go to see Lazarus in Bethany, a stone's throw from Jerusalem.

So what happened the day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem?

Read with me from Mark 11, starting at verse 1, and reading to verse 11.

This has been called the Triumphant Entry. After all Jesus said about bad things happening in Jerusalem, the disciples are pleasantly surprised. Hey, their first taste of the city was not so bad. It was rather festive, even joyous as Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

Did you realize this is the only place in the Gospels where we read about Jesus riding anywhere? And it appears it was not by chance, nor was it a random act that he rode into the

city on a donkey. Mark simply calls it a colt, while Luke informs us that it was a donkey no one had ever ridden before (Luke 19:30).

Mark tells the story of how the disciples secured the donkey for Jesus twice – once as instructions from Jesus and the second time to recount what actually happened. It must be significant that Jesus rode a donkey colt.

In the Gospel of Matthew we read that this very act of the king riding into the city on a donkey was the fulfilment of scripture. Matthew quotes Zechariah 9:9 where it says,

“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” (cf. Matthew 21:5)

Many years earlier God said through the prophet Zechariah that Israel’s true king, the Messiah, would ride into the city on a the colt of a donkey. When Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem that day on the donkey, he came as a king.

Wait a minute, you say. A king on a donkey? Weren’t donkeys for work? Didn’t they carry bundles of wood, or baskets of vegetables, or even people? Kings do not ride donkeys. Kings ride horses, or they ride in chariots, or lounge in fancy wagons.

Actually, kings did ride donkeys, but only under special conditions. When kings rode a horse into a city, it meant they came in battle, or conquest. The king was showing his power and might. However, if a king wanted to come in peace, he would ride on a donkey.

Jesus came in peace. It was going to be hard enough to control the crowds that day, so he did not want to send the wrong message. He was not coming to fight, protest or start a rebellion. Jesus was coming in peace. By riding a donkey, he was letting everyone know this.

But why did it have to be a colt, an unriden donkey? The answer lies in the religious understandings of the Jews. It was well known that if something is to be used for God’s purposes, it must not be used for anything else. The tools necessary for the care of the temple and the performance of the sacrifices could never be used for any other purpose. You could not take the grill off the altar and use it on your BBQ. You could not use the lamps that were found in the temple for your back yard party. King Belshazzar of Babylon learned this the hard way as he used the golden cups taken from the Jewish temple at his party. God’s hand appeared and wrote on the wall, “Your days are numbered, you have been found wanting, your kingdom will be divided.” That night it happened just as God said it would.

Jesus was declaring who he was by the choice of a colt. He was sent from God, the Son of God. By the way, note that at Jesus’ death Jesus will be buried in a new tomb that had not been used before. Once again we see something set aside for God’s use alone.

So Jesus very intentionally arranges the details of his entry to Jerusalem. He has just raised Lazarus from the dead and the religious leaders want to kill Jesus and Lazarus now. But Jesus does not sneak into Jerusalem. He rides in on a donkey... he enters as a king.

Verse 8 tells us there were many people who entered the city that day with Jesus. Where did all the people come from?

The feast of Passover was soon to begin. Jews from all over the provinces of Judea and Galilee would journey to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple. They would celebrate Passover in the city.

No doubt there were many people who came from Galilee to offer their sacrifices. Think about it – where did Jesus do most of his ministry? In Galilee. So imagine the conversations on the road as people noticed Jesus in the crowd making his way to Jerusalem:

“Say, isn’t that Jesus up there? He healed my father.”

“Look, it’s Jesus. I ate bread and fish that seemed to come from nowhere. Jesus did that.”

“Come on, let’s walk with Jesus. Before he touched me, I was a cripple. Now I can walk all the way to Jerusalem. I want to be near Jesus.”

“Yes, I see him. Before Jesus touched my eyes, I saw nothing. But now I see everything, and I see Jesus sitting on a donkey. He looks like a king!”

And soon the people were getting more and more excited. Every year as they journeyed to Jerusalem they hoped this would be the year Messiah would appear and rescue them from the Romans. Jesus would be a great leader, with the miracles he performs, his great wisdom, his ability to lead...

And so the people shouted out sayings taken from the Old Testament that pointed to the coming Messiah.

Hosanna! was a chant that meant, “Lord Save us!” It was chanted by pilgrims each year in hopes that God would hear and send the Messiah. It was a term that reminded the people that God had promised a deliverer, and God never failed to fulfill his promises.

This was followed by “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This was taken from Psalm 118 and was clearly a reference to the coming Messiah. The next line in the Psalm would be, “From the house of the Lord we bless you.”

But the crowd does not say that. Instead, they say, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

The people were tired of being oppressed, having their rights trampled on, losing their freedoms. This chant clearly had a political overtone to it. As John Ortberg writes in his book, “Who is this Man?”

“Those were fighting words!”¹ Blessed is the one who will overthrow Pilate, Herod and Caesar. Blessed is the one who defends our rights.

¹ John Ortberg, “Who is This Man?” (Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 2014), Kindle p. 102.

Even the palm branches could be more than a gesture of praise. 160 years before Jesus was born the Jewish nation was held in the grip of the Greeks. A leader named Judas Maccabees led a rebellion against the oppressors and freed Jerusalem from their grip. The Temple was cleansed and rededicated to God after the Greeks had defiled it. At the rededication ceremony, the people waved palm branches, and from that time onward the palm branch became a symbol of Jewish nationalism. During two major wars against the Romans, Israelite rebels illegally minted their own coins and put palms on them. Again quoting John Ortberg, "Waving a palm branch in front of Rome was like waving a red flag in front of a bull." (Ibid)

Though the crowd was jubilant and excited, part of the excitement was a hope that Jesus would lead the fight for their freedom. They wanted a Messiah who would confront the government and force it to grant religious and political freedom. Wasn't it their right to serve their God in freedom and without restraint? At this time, Herod exercised his authority by taking the High Priests sacred vestments and locking them up in his palace in Antonia, and every year the High Priest had to humbly ask for those vestments so he could perform his priestly duties in the Holy of Holies. When he was done, he had to surrender the vestments to Herod once again.

The people wanted Jesus to fight back, to lead a protest, a rebellion, something.

But Jesus would not fight. He was a king, but he came in peace, to bring peace not just to Israel, but to the whole world. When Jesus was born the Magi sought him out and asked, "Where is he who was born king of the Jews?" The title of king was his from the start. It would be inscribed on a sign over his head as he died on the cross in just a few days. But he would not conquer with violence. He would not lead a rebellion.

He would conquer with love. A love that would embrace the religious leaders who wanted to silence him. A love that embraced the Romans who would drive the nails through his body. A love that would destroy barriers set up to divide men. He would establish a kingdom that embraced every nation, every people group, every language, every age.

Isaiah 16:5 foretold, "In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it-- one from the house of David-- one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness." (NIV)

That was a prophetic look at Jesus. He came to establish a kingdom in love.

Today I do not think that the best way to address the restrictions to public assembly, and all the other COVID restrictions that bother us, is not to lead a rebellion, to defy the orders and start a fight, or to lead a protest. Instead we ought to fall on our knees, repent of our sins and seek the king of peace to deliver us. Jesus is still King. May we submit to him and cry to him alone, "Hosanna" which means, "Save us."

Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem that day. He rode in as the king, one who is ready to set up a throne in any heart that is ready to receive him. He would fight the spiritual forces of evil for us, but not the political forces. Jesus triumphed through sacrifice. And he says to us, "Take up your cross and follow me." Are we willing to do this?