

The Beginning of Holy Week

Introduction

Here we are at the start of Holy Week, a week which many of us know better as Easter Week. It was a week that saw the most amazing events in Christian if not world history. It was a week in which the Son of God was loudly acclaimed as the long awaited Messiah before the mood changed and He became regarded as an insurrectionist before being executed as a common criminal. Today, which we know as Palm Sunday, sees the opening events in this remarkable week.

The early action on that first Palm Sunday took place in two villages close to Jerusalem before the action moved to Jerusalem itself as the city prepared for Jewish festival of Passover. The city would have been filling with visitors from all over the known Jewish world as they gathered together to praise God for saving them at that first Passover, and I doubt that there was a single bed available in a hotel or B&B anywhere in or near the city.

It was into this hubbub of humanity that Jesus was about to make His triumphal entry. However, before we get to that point it's important that we set the scene and take a brief look at what had been happening in the time immediately prior to Jesus making His final entry into Jerusalem.

As we consider what happened on that first Palm Sunday and the beginning of the week, it is worth noting the number of links between the actual events and statements and prophecies that are recorded in the Old Testament. None of these events took place by accident, they were all part of God's eternal plan that He laid down before time began and they were all prophesied or mentioned many, many years earlier in Scripture. Whilst I'll be basing most of my comments on what we can read in [Mark 11:1-11](#) I'll also be looking at what the other gospels have to say about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Setting the Scene

Most of Jesus' ministry appears to have been itinerant in that He didn't stay in one place for very long but walked from place to place to preach, teach and heal in as many locations as possible. The time prior to the "*triumphal entry*" was no different in that Jesus had been in Capernaum at the northwest end of the Sea of Galilee before making the journey into Judea a long way south of Galilee. We read in [Mark 10:1](#) that Jesus entered Judea where crowds gathered as usual and "*as was his custom, he taught them*" ([10:1](#)). It's important to understand that the Pharisees were always trying to trip Jesus up and they always denied that He was the genuine Messiah and so an awkward question regarding divorce can't have come as a surprise to the Lord. Jesus dealt with that in His usual way by teaching from Scripture and quoting what God's Word had to say on the subject. There is a lesson there for us in how to deal with doubters. As Jesus and His followers made progress on their journey towards Jerusalem He continued to spend His time teaching those who were following and walking with Him and having dealt with divorce, He moved on to talk about dealing with children and the kingdom of God, and the parable of the rich young man. He also answered the request from James and John who asked to sit at His right and left hand "*in your glory*". As we can read in [10:40-45](#) Jesus gently rebuked them for that suggestion! At the very end of [Mark 10](#) in [10:46-52](#) we read of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus. As Jesus approached him Bartimaeus realised Who it was coming towards him and cried out "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" ([Mark 10:47](#)). After Jesus rebuked him, Bartimaeus cried out all the more "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" ([Mark 10:48](#)). I find it

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remarkably prescient that a blind man such as Bartimaeus was able to recognise just Who Jesus was whilst many others; sighted and supposedly more intelligent people, just couldn't or wouldn't recognise Him.

Perhaps most interestingly in **10:32-34** we see Jesus foretelling His death for the third time before adding "*after three days he will rise*". In **10:33** of that short passage Jesus mentions "*Gentiles*" in a direct reference to the Romans to whom Jesus was going to be handed over. That situation is prophesied in **Psalm 22:7**; **Isaiah 50:6, 53:5** and it is in **Isaiah 53:5** where we read "*... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*" That punishment was meted out by Pontius Pilate who wanted to satisfy the crowd who had been calling for Jesus to be crucified.

The City of Jerusalem lies at the centre of Judea some considerable distance south of the Sea of Galilee which tells us just how far Jesus walked as He made His way slowly along the road to His death. As Jesus and His disciples made their way to Jerusalem, only Jesus would have known what events were to unfold during the most momentous week in Christian history.

Event 1 – The Colt

I spoke to you recently about predestination as discussed in **Ephesians 1:6-10**, a doctrine which refers to people and salvation rather than any specific events. However, we need to understand that God also predestined events throughout history and what happened during Holy Week is an obvious example of that. As Jesus and the disciples continued their walk to Jerusalem they came to "*Bethphage and Bethany, at the 'Mount of Olives'*" (**11:1**). These two villages are approximately a mile apart and lie on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives while Jerusalem is about two miles away.

As they walked along Jesus told two of the disciples to go on ahead to the village that they were approaching, where they would find a colt tethered outside a house. They were to untie it and bring it to Him for Him to ride into Jerusalem. How does that sound to you? A bit dodgy? Here was Jesus, their Friend asking them to go to someone's house and take his colt without asking permission or even talking to the owner! Although Mark doesn't record their response to this request, I suspect that they may have been more than a little worried about this even though it was Jesus asking them to do it. One source I consulted suggested that Jesus had been a frequent visitor to Bethany and may have been known to the local people and so requesting the use of the colt may have been expected. Regardless of that, Jesus must have sensed the concern of His disciples and so told them to tell anyone who challenged them, "*The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.*" (**11:3b**). They were of course challenged but responded just as Jesus had told them to, and no doubt to their amazement "*the people let them go*" (**11:6b**). Here was God at work as He began the implementation of His plan for the week. As we think about this, it's interesting to note that Jesus told His disciples to collect a colt "*which no one has ever ridden*" (**11:2b**). Whilst that may not mean much to us, it was certainly very significant at the time. There are a number of rules specified in the Old Testament about the use of animals for sacred purposes, the most important being that they must not have been used for ordinary purposes prior to their sacred use. In **Numbers 19:2** Moses and Aaron were told to use a red heifer as a sacrifice and it should be "*without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke.*" You will

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also find similar rules mentioned in [Deuteronomy 21:3](#) and [1 Samuel 6:7](#). The choice of this particular colt did not happen by accident but was all part of God's plan for His Son.

The two disciples took this colt back to Jesus as requested and saddled it up by throwing their cloaks over it for Jesus to sit on. With Jesus on the colt and the disciples walking beside Him, they approached Jerusalem and made that famous triumphal entry. As they did so the crowds cut down and waved palm branches before laying them on the road in front of the colt for it to walk on. This was very reminiscent of the way that conquering heroes entered a major city although they tended to be on a great white charger surrounded by soldiers rather than on a colt that had never been ridden before and accompanied by a dozen disciples! This was though in fulfilment of the prophecy made in [Zechariah 9:9](#) where we read, "*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.*" The laying of garments on the colt for Jesus to sit on and on the road in front of Him were surely signs of His majesty, something which we see described in [2 Kings 9:13](#). In that passage we learn that Jehu had been declared King of Israel and we then read, "*They quickly took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, 'Jehu is king!'*"

Event 2 – The Entry

As I pointed out earlier, Jerusalem was extremely busy as people arrived to gather together to celebrate Passover. The roads into Jerusalem were bustling with people joyously walking and chatting together. It was into this crowd that Jesus arrived. Most people in the crowds knew Who He was and so Jesus received massive greetings from the people with banners being waved; verses from Scripture being shouted out; with palm leaves being taken from nearby trees to be used as banners and then laid on the road for the colt to ride over. These joyous crowds all wanted to see Jesus; get close to Him or perhaps even touch Him.

The gospels don't mention any figures for the size of the crowd although Matthew says it was "*a very large crowd*" ([Matthew 21:8](#)). Consequently I've tried to think of an example of the sort of crowd that we may know about to help us understand and form a picture of just how many people were converging on Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. The best I can think of is the FA Cup Final crowd as they walk down Wembley Way towards the stadium. They're happy, cheering and shouting support for their team. They're waving banners and scarves to indicate their support. They meet old friends and there are families gathering together to watch the match together. You may have seen such scenes on TV at some time of another. That was what the crowd was like on this occasion as they made their way to Jerusalem. There would have been a buzz of conversation; the hum of joy; the air of expectation; all of it mixed with praise to God for what He had done for the nation and their ancestors.

As Jesus passed by the crowd shouted in unison: "*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!'*" ([Mark 11:9-10](#)). Luke reports a subtle difference in what the people chanted when he tells us they shouted, "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*" ([Luke 19:38](#)) a chant that surely acknowledges Jesus' kingship. Both of these versions have echoes of [Psalm 118:25-26](#), "*O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.*" ([Psalm 118:25-26](#)) and suggests that the people recognised or realised that Jesus was from God

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and was indeed the long awaited Messiah. Needless to say the Pharisees who were present were not impressed and Luke tells us that *“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’”* (Luke 19:39-40)

Event 3 – What Happened Next

The accounts of what happened after that amazing arrival into Jerusalem vary between the gospels although that shouldn't mean that we ignore them or regard them as being wrong. We need to remember that the gospels weren't written extemporaneously but much later and they relied on the memory of any number of people. It's also interesting that none of the accounts tell us how long the procession lasted or how far Jesus and His disciples walked into Jerusalem. What we do know from Mark is that Jesus *“went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.”* (11:11). It's interesting to note that despite the overwhelming welcome He had received, it wasn't really safe for Jesus to stay in Jerusalem; which is why He and His disciples went back to Bethany for the night possibly to stay with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

It was the next day that the mood changed somewhat. For some the joy of Sunday turned into the despair and even anger of Monday. We learn from John 11:55 that many were hoping that Jesus would visit the Temple during Passover. John tells us, *“They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, ‘What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?’”* However, quite what they made of events when He did visit is anyone's guess! Mark tells us in 11:15-17 of the events that occurred when Jesus did go back to the Temple. However, before we look at those verses it is worth looking back to a previous Passover festival. In the opening verses of John 2 we read about Jesus at the wedding at Cana where He turned water into wine in His first recorded miracle. Shortly after that miracle Jesus and His disciples went into Jerusalem to visit the Temple. Jesus wanted His Father's house to be a place of prayer and teaching so you may imagine how horrified He was with what He saw and as John writes, *“In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!’”* (John 2:14-16) Just imagine the noise and the chaos as Jesus did that; it must have been quite a commotion! Now, at this later Passover festival and upon entering the Temple, He found exactly the same activities taking place all over again. Mark conjures up a similar picture to John's from the earlier occasion when he writes, *“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”* (11:15-17). Just imagine the commotion, chaos and confusion that reigned as Jesus became, quite rightly, very angry. There would have been birds flying all around, animals running round wildly and money strewn across the floor. None of this commercial activity could have taken place without the collusion of the Pharisees and I've no doubt that they were making money out of each of the traders who were using the Temple courts as their place of business. That meant that Jesus had

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not only upset them on religious grounds but also on financial grounds. Thinking about modern times, I wonder what Jesus would think if He visited some of our Cathedrals today. They may not be selling livestock or dealing in the exchange of money but there is certainly a lot of commercial activity taking place which certainly goes against the grain of a Cathedral being a house of prayer. Whilst some may have been looking forward to the prospect of Jesus visiting the Temple, the Pharisees took the opposite view. John tells us, “... *the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.*” (John 11:57) This may well have been the time when the plot to kill Jesus began.

I said a moment ago that the Pharisees put out an order that Jesus should be arrested if He appeared in or near the Temple; that story is continued by Mark when he tells us of the thoughts and actions of the powers that be in the Temple following Jesus’ actions. Mark writes; “*The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching*” (11:18). The plot to kill Jesus that had started much earlier and which Matthew mentions in Matthew 12:14; now gathered pace as the perceived threat from Jesus grew in seriousness.

That threat following Jesus’ drastic action in clearing the Temple courts of the traders and money changers may explain why He chose to spend each night outside Jerusalem. We read in Luke 21:37 that, “*Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives*”.

Conclusion

The events of this most momentous week in world history began in triumph with the great entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The crowds were large and ecstatic; here was the One they had been waiting for; here was the One Who was going to bring about liberation and freedom. Not for the first time though the thoughts of the people in that crowd differed from the thoughts of the religious leaders of the day.

The people could see a bright future, a future of liberation and freedom from the yoke of the occupying Romans. On the other hand the Pharisees could see a threat to their privileged position; a challenge to their superiority, and a challenge to their teaching. Everything that happened in the early part of the week thrilled the crowds but hardened the attitudes of the Pharisees whose plot to kill Jesus and get rid of Him once and for all gathered pace. As we already know, that whole situation came to a head on Good Friday.