

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Palm Sunday, Matthew 21.1-11
9 April 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

The folks who set up our Palm Sunday lectionary have done us both a service and a disservice in their selection of the two gospel readings for this morning—readings that function as what might be called “book ends” for the events of Holy Week. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem sets the stage for his last, climatic week, but then—essentially ignoring the story of the intervening days—we jump ahead with the Passion narrative to the end of the week. Since most contemporary western churches no longer observe Holy Week strictly, this liturgical strategy does us the service of presenting us with the “big picture” of this extremely important week in the life of Jesus and, as it turned out, in the life of the church, though it does so in a much-condensed version. The disservice is just that—it is a condensed version and, because of this, we miss some very important events and teachings of Jesus on the intervening days—events and teachings that better help us understand what Jesus was trying to accomplish with his decision to go to Jerusalem in the first place and, then, why he was executed on a Roman cross—something that is not at all obvious to most commentators.

In our Lenten book discussion, we were able to fill in some of these gaps by following the story of Holy Week day by day as portrayed in Mark’s gospel. It is my intention in this morning’s service, as well as in our other services this week, to help us fill in some of these gaps ourselves and, while we’re doing so, to address some very important questions that are either implied or made explicit in

the story. One of those questions I've already mentioned—why was Jesus executed, and why on a Roman cross? But other questions concern the relation of Jesus' intense suffering to the notion of loving God, a God whom Jesus addressed as "Father." Did Jesus have to suffer so intensely, and, if so, why? Another way of asking this question is, why did he feel himself "forsaken" by God? Couldn't there have been another way? And then, after all this, why was his death viewed by his followers as a victory and not an utter defeat? Finally, at Easter, I want to consider how we might understand the resurrection, and what it could mean for us in our day to day lives and as we face our own mortality. These are big, heavy, and sometimes complex questions, but they are at the very center of Holy Week and thus at the center of our faith. If we ignore them, we are doing a further disservice to ourselves and, in a very real sense, to Jesus himself. So, let's begin. Today, I will concentrate on the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and push off the discussion of the crucifixion itself. What's going on here? What was Jesus trying to accomplish with this strange action?

We've already seen in the last few months that Jesus' primary mission was centered in announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. For Jews, the arrival of the kingdom would mean: first, the forgiveness of sins, understood as a complete return from almost 500 years of exile; second, and related to the return from exile, the defeat of the nations that had been oppressing the Jews for centuries; and, third, the return of God to Jerusalem to dwell in their midst in the way God was believed to have been present in the time of David's reign and after Solomon had completed the first Temple. Over time, these three markers of the kingdom also began to be associated with a fourth—prophecies concerning the coming of a messiah in the Davidic line to help bring about the other markers of the

kingdom's arrival. In some cases, the prophecies were rather vague and in some they were explicit; and in other cases, two messiahs were envisioned, one a priest and one a king. But in most cases, the messiah would act to restore the kingdom, overthrow the oppressors, and symbolize God's renewed presence to the people as the son of God.

When Jesus' procession came into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, he was signaling to all with eyes to see that the kingdom of God was arriving, but also, as we've come to expect by now, that it was arriving with what we might call a symbolic twist. Jesus seemed more influenced by those few prophecies that predicted the coming of a humble messiah. And so, Jesus' entry was not that of a conquering hero, riding on a large war horse in front of an army and accompanied by the usual trumpets and drums—that, we learned from our Lenten book study, was happening at the same time on the other side of town as Pilate processed into Jerusalem. Jesus entry was *not—again, not*—the “triumphal entry” Christians usually imagine it to be. Instead, it was a planned and calculated protest demonstration against, first, Roman occupation and oppression and, second, the widely-held Jewish notion of the messiah as a military leader. It was a signal to the Jews that the Messiah and, along with this, the kingdom of God, were arriving. They just weren't the Messiah and the kingdom the Jews had expected.

This being said, perhaps what is key to understanding what Jesus was really intending with his entry into Jerusalem is not discussed in our readings this morning. If we ask the question, where did Jesus go when he got off that donkey, the answer is, he went directly to the Temple. In Mark, he goes there, looks around and decides to come back the next day, but in Matthew he goes to the

Temple and gets right to it! And the “it” that Jesus gets to is, again, often misconstrued by Christians. We typically see Jesus’ action as a “cleansing of the Temple,” as he suddenly and without warning begins disrupting its normal activities in a very big way, calling the Temple a “den of robbers.” However, his actions are better understood as a symbolic judgment of destruction on the Temple—and this along with his prediction of its *actual* destruction in the not-too-distant future. This kind of prophetic action also was believed to be a legitimate role for the Messiah, for as much as the common folk among the Jews loved their Temple, they also despised the corruption and collaboration with Rome they saw in the Temple’s leadership. They wanted things to change, as well, which accounts for the concern of the Temple authorities with Jesus’ growing popularity among the people.

So, the kingdom of God was coming, and, in fact, it was arriving in their sight! And it was coming in the person of Jesus, who indeed seemed to see himself as the Messiah, but it was coming without violence or military action. Nevertheless, as we heard, it was also coming with judgment—judgment not just against Roman oppression—that was expected—but also judgment against the Jewish people as a whole for their commitment to violent, national rebellion and against the Jewish political and religious leaders for their treatment toward those within their own society who were oppressed as a result of their collaboration with the Romans. Put all this together with the simmering tensions around Passover—a feast celebrating Jewish liberation from Egypt’s oppression and a time selected deliberately by Jesus for his demonstration and entry into Jerusalem—and suddenly the meek and mild Jesus is looking like a very real and very present danger to national stability—at least, national stability as the corrupt

and collaborating Temple leaders saw it. Is it any wonder why Matthew tells us that the “whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’” Who, indeed.

I’m going to stop here, and pick up the story during our services later in Holy Week. For now, I want to suggest that we are getting very close to an answer to one our questions: Why did Jesus die on a Roman cross? In short, he died because his Jewish enemies viewed him as messianic pretender, with royal aspirations that, when handed over to Roman authorities, led those Roman authorities to conclude Jesus was another in a long line of revolutionaries who merited their most gruesome and public death, crucifixion. In other words, he died because his actions and words led others to conclude that he saw himself as the Messiah, king of the Jews, just as the sign on the cross above his head would soon read; for the Jewish leaders, he was not the Messiah and, for Rome, he was a threat to Roman imperial authority.

But, as we’ll see, this was not the whole story. The authorities knew he was a revolutionary, but he was not a violent revolutionary. And, most Christians would have answered the question about why Jesus died with the response, “he died for my sins and the sins of the whole world.” We’ll explore this particular question later in Holy Week. For now, I end where our Lenten book ended, with more questions.

“Holy Week and the journey of Lent are about an alternative procession and an alternative journey. The alternative procession we see on Palm Sunday, [is] an anti-imperial and nonviolent procession...Holy Week as the annual remembrance of Jesus’s last week presents us with the always relevant questions:

Which journey are we on? Which procession are we in?" (Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, p.216). Are we with Rome? Or, are we with Jesus? Amen.