

## Into the Holy City: symbolic procession (Mark 11: 1-10)

### *Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem*

*11When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples<sup>2</sup> and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.<sup>3</sup> If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."<sup>4</sup> They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it,<sup>5</sup> some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?'<sup>6</sup> They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.<sup>7</sup> Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.<sup>8</sup> Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.<sup>9</sup> Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*'Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

## Commentary

### "Triumphal Entry"?

Here's a puzzle. Why is the gospel passage traditionally known as "The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" (as the NRSV heads this pericope), when Jesus only enters the city *after* all the commotion and acclamation has died down and finished? If anything, it's a "triumphal *approach*", but the actual entry into the city (v11) is extraordinarily anticlimactic: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve". All that fuss and excitement – and by the time he actually gets *into* the city, the fuss has died down and it's too late in the day to do anything more striking than to have a look around the temple and then head off to Bethany!

Mark's gospel, we need to remember, is written like a dramatic play. At this point in his narrative, we arrive with Jesus at Jerusalem, the scene of the great, final conflict that is about to take place. This is the denouement – the unleashing of the storm that has been building with startling intensity and pace ever since the outset of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum (1:21ff). Those earlier conflicts were played out against the backdrop of Jerusalem and the Temple, and we saw the fierce opposition Jesus provoked. The city extended its threatening hand deep into the margins of the Galilee. Now Jesus is bringing the fight to Jerusalem. It's showdown time, and Mark signals its beginning with a suitably high-octane piece of street theatre: Jesus, a

donkey, palm-waving crowds and a fevered outbreak of messianic political expectation. Let's examine some of the elements of his choreography:

### 1. **Political street theatre: The periphery vs the centre**

The action, as we have noted, actually takes place *outside* the city – within sight of the city walls but still, significantly, outside them. We need to note the contrast between the activity outside the city and the non-events of the rest of the day (v11). Mark is drawing our attention yet again to the contrast between the reception that Jesus receives on the margins, among the ordinary rural people, and the reception he receives from Jerusalem as the centre of political and religious power. Those on the periphery hear his message of the kingdom and receive his ministry as Good News; those in the centre perceive it as threatening and maybe even demonic in origin. The crowds who shout “Hosanna!” (which comes from Psalm 118: 25 and is a cry to God meaning “Save now!”) are the rural peasants, rather than the urban elite of Jerusalem. These are not the city's inhabitants. They are those who have cut palms (or is it straw?) “from the fields”. They acclaim Jesus as a Davidic king and messiah. By contrast, Jesus' first interaction with the city's inhabitants is to drive the moneychangers from the temple in the immediate aftermath of symbolically cursing the “fruitlessness” of the fig tree (1: 12ff). This leads directly into the conflict in the temple with the chief priests, scribes and elders, who demand to know by what authority Jesus is doing these things (1: 27ff). Those on the periphery recognise God's presence in Jesus (“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”); those at the centre can only see Jesus as godless.

### 2. **Political street theatre: the Mount of Olives and the final battle**

Mark casts Jesus' approach to Jerusalem as a march upon the city – the climax of Jesus' “campaign” of confrontation. Jerusalem was occupied by a hated foreign power. The cry, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David!” is the cry of hope for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, and therefore the overthrow of the Romans. This is political dynamite in the climate of the time. It would entail not only the overthrow of Imperial Rome, but the ousting of the collaborators – the Jewish ruling classes. It was a *religious* cry – “Yahweh, save NOW!” – and also and necessarily a cry of *rebellion*. Moreover, Mark wants us to understand that, if Jesus is indeed the leader of an imminent revolt, *this* revolution is not going to be one in a long list of failed popular uprisings that have ended in crucifixions. *This* one is the real thing!

He does this by placing the origin of the march “near the Mount of Olives”, a place associated in the early apocalyptic tradition with the final battle against the enemies of Israel in defence of Jerusalem: “I will gather the nations against Jerusalem to do battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered ... Then Yahweh will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day, his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives” (Zechariah 14: 2-4). In so doing, he is evoking and echoing quite deliberately the messianic/apocalyptic theology of the Jewish recruiters at work in Mark's own time and among his church, who (mistakenly) see the Great revolt as the eschatological messianic battle against the Occupation.

Moreover, the procession itself recalls the military entry of the triumphant rebel Simon Maccabaeus into Jerusalem “with praise and palm branches ... and with hymns and songs” (1 Mc 13:51). An additional factor that may have shaped Mark’s telling of the story is the striking parallels between Mark’s narrative and Menahem, who, during the Sicarii uprising, had led a revolt in the wake of the liberation of Jerusalem from Rome in 66, just a few years before Mark’s gospel was written. Menahem (according to the historian Josephus) “entered Jerusalem in the state of a king”. He went to the temple as a “messiah”.

One thing is clear: if we imagine Mark’s gospel being “staged” before an audience in the 70s, we cannot miss how politically loaded this episode is.

### 3. **Political street theatre: the Liberator on an ass**

For all the military imagery and echoes of the liberation-of-Jerusalem tradition, Mark employs another set of counter-imagery that is explicitly antimilitary. Ched Myers points out that over half of the episode is given over to the detailed instructions from Jesus to the “two disciples” in preparation for the procession. Jesus much earlier spoke of David getting what he *needed* for his military campaign (2:25). Here Jesus, like David, gets what *he* needs for *his* campaign (11:3). In this case, it is a lowly ass. Mark is here invoking the very different tradition, also present in Zechariah, of the Messiah who comes to Zion “meek, riding upon an ass” (Zechariah 9:9f).

Two contrasting images from Zechariah, echoes of rebel liberators – and a counter-image quite explicitly distancing Jesus from them: Mark is playing with his audience. Imagine being in the situation of watching a thriller unfold, and trying to predict what happens next. We’re caught in the throes of the “Will he/won’t he? Is he/isn’t he?” debates. What does Jesus intend to do? Is he about to start the revolution? Will he restore the Davidic monarchy? Is the Temple about to be liberated?

### 4. **Political street theatre: the kingdom of David or the Kingdom of God?**

That Jesus is a messianic claimant is clear throughout the gospel. That his “march on Jerusalem” is a provocative act, heralding a final showdown with the authorities is equally clear. Throughout the gospel, the question that has been raised is what *sort* of Messiah Jesus is. Mark, in his narrative of the approach to Jerusalem, faces us with another, related question: what sort of *king* is Jesus? This is the question that will obsess Pilate at Jesus’ trial. While the Council want to know whether Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One”, the only question that interests Pilate concerns kingship, and he cuts directly to the chase: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (15:2)

With the “Hosanna” cry of the crowds, Mark brings together two dominant traditions in contemporary messianic politics. The first is the messiah-liberator tradition, rife in Galilee and which Jesus has resisted. Now he brings restorationism to the fore: the restoration of the Davidic monarchy under a Davidic king.

## 5. Reading ahead

Jesus *is* the Messiah and he *is* a king. It is not popular expectation – or even the Jewish scriptures – that will define these terms, however, but the Way of the Cross. Jesus is a revolutionary and a rebel. He is a liberator. Once again, it is the Way of the Cross that will define these terms. He is a rebel because the proclamation of the Good News challenges the political and religious powers of his day. In that sense, he stands firmly with the rural peasants and against the urban elite. The religious purity system that shuts the poorest out is contrary to the character of the very God it supposes it worships. Like all false gods, it will be swept away. Rome proclaimed that Caesar is king and god. It, too, will be swept away – as will all powers ranged against the Kingdom of God.

Ironically, unthinkably and unimaginably, the means by which God will accomplish this is through the very solution that the authorities employ to solve the “problem” of this upstart who stands at the gates and challenges their authority: the Way of the Cross. God isn’t as limited and parochial as to aim only at the restoration of the Davidic temple state: God’s got the whole world in view!