

## April 5, 2009; Palm Sunday

Key Bible reference: Mark 11.1-33

Key Verse: Mark 11.9

### Biblical Background

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem sets the stage for the final act of the Passion drama. Mark has been moving the reader to this crucial point since the first Passion prediction (Mark 8:31). Chapters 8-10, which contain three Passion predictions, are enclosed by two stories of men who are blind being healed: the man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and Bartimaeus (10:46-52). These stories act as bookends to Jesus' teaching on discipleship. The locations of these two accounts of healings of men who are blind seem to offer a message: Those who can truly "see" recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

We should take care to read Mark's account of the triumphal entry on its own terms. We often blend in aspects of the other Gospels' accounts, such as palm branches (John 12:13) and the quote from Zechariah 9:9c in Matthew and Luke.

Mark 11:1. The mention of the Mount of Olives is significant. Zechariah 14:4 prophesies the coming of God to the Mount of Olives at the end of time. While Mark does not cite this verse, the attentive reader would make the connection between Jesus and this prophecy.

Verses 2-3. While Mark's account of the triumphal entry offers few details, the finding of the colt is an exception. "Colt" can mean either a horse or a donkey, although it usually means "horse." In sending the two disciples for the colt, Jesus' foresight is again shown. Mark does not cite the passage from Zechariah that Jesus

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fulfills by riding into Jerusalem on a colt. However, Mark obviously has it in mind.

The detailed instructions given for finding the colt show that this is a well-planned event rather than a spontaneous occurrence. "The Lord needs it" indicates a king's royal prerogative. Note, however, that Jesus promises to return the colt, while a king probably would not.

Verses 4-7. The disciples followed the instructions exactly, demonstrating obedience. The details from verses 2-3 are repeated. The actions unfold just as Jesus prophesied. Mark gives the impression that every detail has been considered in advance. Jesus mounted the colt like a king, sitting on the cloaks of the disciples.

Verse 8. Cloaks and "leafy branches" were spread along the road for the colt to walk on. This was a well-established custom showing homage for a king (see 2 Kings 9:13). Mark is silent about how the crowds came to gather to greet Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. Presumably, the word had spread that an important person would be entering the city like a king.

Verses 9-10. The words of praise and acclamation quoted are based on Psalm 118:25-26. "Hosanna," meaning "God will save," was used both as a plea for God's intervention and as a shout of praise. Here it seems to be used as praise for Jesus. The phrase "the one who comes" is a reference to the Messiah (Matthew 11:3; Luke 7:19). The praise of the "kingdom of

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our ancestor David" is a parallel to the title Bartimaeus used for Jesus: "Son of David" (10:47).

Verse 11. Although this verse is not included in the printed verses, it is the conclusion of the triumphal entry. Amazingly, when Jesus arrived at the Temple, he looked around and simply left with the disciples.

Verse 15. The account of Jesus cleansing the Temple is sandwiched between the cursing of the fig tree (verses 12-14) and the lesson from the withered fig tree (verse 20-25). Mark is telling us that Israel is like a fig tree that bears no fruit: It has the outward appearance of righteousness -but does not possess the inward faith that bears fruit.

The Temple was built by Herod the Great in 20 B.C. on the same site where Solomon built the ancient Temple. The building stood in the middle of four courts. The outer court, known as the "Court of the Gentiles," was the largest and contained booths operated by traders and money changers. The traders sold items needed for sacrifices (wine, oil, birds, small animals); the money changers changed the Greek and Roman money into the currency used in the Temple. It is not clear who organized the trading or who received the profits.

While we assume that the trading itself was corrupt, Mark seems to focus on the commercialization of the Temple. We also assume righteous anger on the part of Jesus because he overturned the tables, although Mark does not tell us how Jesus felt. It would be nearly impossible for Jesus to have cleared the entire Court of the Gentiles, which could hold thousands of sheep and hundreds of

merchants. Jesus' action probably took place in a limited area and was symbolic. Any large-scale action would have drawn the attention of the Temple police.

Verse 16. Jesus' not allowing people to "carry anything through the temple" was to enforce the Temple rules. There may have also been rules against using the Temple court as a thoroughfare.

Verse 17. After taking these actions, Jesus taught the crowd. The only element of the teaching Mark records are quotations from Isaiah 56:7 ("for my house shall be called a house of prayer / for all peoples"), and Jeremiah 7:11 ("Has this house, which is called by my name, become a dens of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.").

Verse 18. The conclusion to the cleansing describes the reaction of the chief priests and scribes: They looked for a way to kill Jesus. Jesus was a threat to them, and they were "afraid" of him. However, they could not arrest Jesus because the crowd was "spellbound by his teaching."

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, keep us open to your surprises and flexible enough to be able to respond when you call. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.