

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 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. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” ’ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ 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. (240)

Two processions entered Jerusalem that day—one from the east, the other from the west.

The procession from the east was a peasant procession, Jesus entering Jerusalem in what has been described as a triumphal entry. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg describe it as a peasant entry, in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*.

The procession from the west, according to Borg and Crossan, was an imperial procession, Pontius Pilate entering Jerusalem in order to occupy it during the feast of the Passover. This was to ensure order amidst the annual swelling of the city, a couple hundred thousand pilgrims arrived, doubling the population of the city. This would itself bring potential for disorder. But Passover in particular: this festival was one for remembering the long-ago liberation from the exploits of empire, the people escaping enslavement in Egypt. The fact that the people were once again living amidst the exploits of empire might have made imperial presence for *this* festival in particular all the more imperative. The people shouldn’t be let to get any ideas. This was a festival of remembrance, not enactment. This was for remembering things past, not manifesting new hope for the future.

Really, let’s not get any ideas.

Crossan and Borg fill out the picture for us. “Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles...” (Is it worth saying here that modern fascism took its aesthetic cues from ancient Rome? Mussolini sought to revive the militant

Roman aesthetic past. Hitler sought to do Mussolini one better.) “...sunlight glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful...”

As for how the meaning of this spectacle, Rome’s Jewish subjects would have understood that Pilate’s procession embodied “not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.” The emperor, now Tiberius, would have been claimed as “son of God,” “lord,” “savior.” Sound familiar? He proclaimed himself to have brought peace to earth, and after his death it would be said that he was seen to have ascended to heaven.

As for the peasant entry from the east, we don’t need Crossan and Borg to fill that out for us. For that, we’ve got the gospel of Mark, and also of Matthew and Luke, which is why we hear this story every year, each year of the church’s three-year lectionary cycle following one of these three gospels closely. Since this is featured in all three gospels, it’s also featured in all three church years, Year A, Year B, and Year C. It’s why you’re likely familiar with this story. Even if you don’t know many other stories of the Bible, you might well know this one—the palms, the donkey. (Forget that neither palms nor a donkey make an appearance according to Mark. That’s how stories go.)

It appears in all three synoptic gospels, and in the fourth gospel, John, for what that’s worth. That said, I’d guess we’d hear it every year even if it appeared in fewer than all four. After all, with this story, we enter real time with Jesus. Narrative time slows down here. Whereas once, a few chapters ago, a couple of verses could have narrated a whole month, now a couple of verses slow to narrate a couple of moments. With half the book behind us now, half still ahead, we’ve got three years behind us and now eight days ahead.

Time slows down here, and we’re in real time with Jesus.

This event happened on a Sunday, the first day of the week, whose following Thursday would be what this coming Thursday will be, Maundy Thursday; whose following Friday would be what this coming Friday will be, Good Friday; whose following Saturday would be what this coming Saturday will be, Holy Saturday, a silent, stultifying Sabbath for those closest to Jesus who likely wondered, what the hell just happened?

So, here begins the end.

This, though, is itself a beginning. The end of this gospel is actually a sending back to the beginning. Mark’s gospel is a circular one. Its ending sends us back to the beginning to follow

again in the way of Christ—and not as an act merely of remembrance, but as enactment, as if with each pass through, we come closer to actually following in the way. A drilling down. A spiraling up. What's been taught to us now impressing itself upon us, writing itself on our hearts.

The way of Christ: this is a way that leads to Jerusalem, a city with a storied past and a troubling present in the time of Jesus. It housed the double domination system under which Roman Jewry lived. The local domination system centered in the Temple to impose social order unto Jews by Jews. The imperial domination system, which subsumed the local system, collaborated with Temple authorities, imposing social order with ever increasing acts of terror—crucifixions and the like.

See, the Temple was the hot point for this double domination system, which are the sort of systems that have always run the world—always and still do. They combine political oppression, wherein the few rule the many; with economic exploitation, wherein the wealthy extract wealth from the peasant class; and coopt the given religion for legitimation, winning the imprimatur of the sacred so to seem that the way things are is in accordance with God's will or with fate or with reality: it's just “the way it is,” to quote the song with which we began the season of Lent. “That's just the way it is. Some things will never change.” Roman Jewry lived under the weight of this double-much—the Temple cult keeping the peasant class in good order, and the imperial cult keeping all of Jewry in line, with the help of Temple authorities.

The way of Christ: this is a way that leads to the place of confronting the authorities of the world with an altogether different sort of reign in mind. Political oppression, the ruling of the many by the few, will meet with a reign of love and liberation. Economic exploitation, the wealthy extracting wealth from the peasants, will be met with an economy of sufficiency and justice. Religious legitimation, the use of the things of God in service of things not of God, will fall away as God will be the all in all.

The way of Christ: it is a way that leads to suffering and death because it will not yield to the powers and principalities of the world that deal in suffering and death.

The way of Christ: it leads at last to resurrection as death shall be no more, revealed to be as the horizon, which is just the limit of our sight. It's coming. Love is coming, and it will stop at nothing, cannot not be terrorized into yielding, cannot not swayed or turned aside. So, bring on your warhorses. Bring on your clanking iron, glinting gold, creaking leather, your battle-kitsch. Love is coming and it has already won because it cannot lose.

Hosanna.

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Two processions entered Jerusalem that day. The question the gospel means to ask is which procession are you in?

Thanks be to God.