

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/24/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Palm Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, March 24th

Mark 11:1-11

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Not the Jesus they expected

If we were to read Mark's account of the so-called triumphal entry without any familiarity of the other accounts, we might be a little surprised. It reads like a parody of the hail-the-conquering-hero scene familiar to Mark's original audience. While the details may vary, the format of such a type-scene is consistent. An example of such a scene is found within the non-canonical 1 Maccabees 5:45-54 detailing the return of Judas Maccabeus to Israel after a triumphal massacre. The conquering hero goes up to Mount Zion with fanfare and jubilation and the precession culminates with making burnt offerings. In Mark's account, there is no massacre or victory – Jesus does not even carry a sword. Jesus enters on a lowly colt, and when He and His followers reach the temple, they have a look around and then go back to their lodging. Where is the climax? What are we to make of this?

Mark 11:1-11 Commentary

Where Luke's story begins in Jerusalem, Mark's story ends in Jerusalem. The final stage of Jesus' journey has arrived. After the time of withdrawal around Caesarea Philippi in the north, the time in Galilee, the stay in the hill country and the regions beyond the Jordan, and the road through Jericho, now Jesus and his disciples arrive at Jerusalem. This text is thus an important turning point in Mark's Gospel.

¹¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. ⁵ And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go.

The two villages mentioned were close to Jerusalem. Bethphage was within a Sabbath's journey of Jerusalem and Bethany was a known lodging place for pilgrims to the Passover when there was no room in Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives was the scene of Ezekiel's vision of glory of the Lord (Ezekiel 11:23) and a location in Zechariah's prophecy of the coming day of the Lord (Zechariah 14:4).

The synoptic Gospels record Jesus entering Jerusalem only once (as an adult). John, on the other hand, has Jesus in Jerusalem multiple times – as would be expected. This is not a contradiction but simply a matter of focus. The instructions to two of the disciples suggest Jesus has planned events in advance. In the original Greek text, "The

Lord has need of it, “the Lord” could refer to God, Jesus, or the owner of the colt. In the latter case, the owner of the colt could have been a disciple of Jesus since it is passers by rather than the owner that question the two disciples about what they were doing. The significance of a colt “*on which no one has ever sat*” is unclear. It may simply be consistent with any animal being used for a sacred purpose could not have already been used for any other purpose. Mark gives no explanation of why Jesus opted to enter Jerusalem riding on a colt. Both Matthew and John cite excerpts from Zechariah 9:9:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

⁷ And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹ And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”

This scene connects with the specific details of the praise and palm branches of another example of triumphal entry (1 Maccabees 13:51). Unlike the acclamations in the other three Gospels (Matthew 21:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13b), in Mark, no specific praise is attributed specifically to Jesus. It is more of a general blessing.

¹¹ And 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.

Jesus went into the temple as the sovereign Lord of the temple (see Malachi 3:1) rather than as a pilgrim. His work would begin in the morning. If the crowds were waiting for some climax to the triumphal entry, it would not happen on this day. Jesus was not the triumphant and victorious worldly Messiah they were expecting. To the crowds, this would almost have been an anti-climax, a parody of a triumphal entry. It would just be a matter of a few days that the shouts of “*Hosanna*” would become shouts of “*Crucify him!*”

Reflection and Application

Jesus predicted his death and resurrection three times, and His disciples still did not understand the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship (and thus the nature of their discipleship). Jesus’ ministry had fueled Messianic fervor. Perhaps Jesus orchestrated the triumphal entry to demonstrate the kind of Messiah Jesus was as an attempt to correct such misunderstandings. Eventually the crowd gets it. He is not the political Messiah of their hopes. The crowd soon turns against Jesus thus paving the way to the ultimate success of Jesus’ ministry – His crucifixion and subsequent resurrection.

Mark’s account of the triumphal entry is less triumphal than the other Gospels. Perhaps, like Jesus, Mark’s goal is to challenge and confront misunderstandings about Jesus and His role as the Messiah to his readers. This text thus confronts us in our understanding of Jesus. Christ never stops surprising us.

This text also illustrates in two places how Jesus’ ministry was ordered and planful. First, the incident with the colt suggests prior planning. Second, Jesus does not just burst into the temple on Monday and start throwing people out. He spent time observing and analyzing what was happening on the day He arrived – He looked around at everything. This demonstration of doing things in good order should be a model for our respective ministries.

In the final Sunday before Good Friday and Easter, the question asked by the onlookers to the two disciples untying the colt could be directed at us today, “*What are you doing?*”