

**Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion
At the Procession with Palms**



¹ When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples² and said to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here.³ If anyone should say to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ reply, ‘The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.’”⁴ So they went off and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street, and they untied it.⁵ Some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?”⁶ They answered them just as Jesus had told them to, and they permitted them to do it.⁷ So they brought the colt to Jesus and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it.⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.⁹ Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”¹⁰ Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:1-10)

In Lectionary Cycle B, this passage is the gospel read at the start of the Palm Sunday celebration before the procession with the palms. There is another gospel proclaimed that day: the Passion of the Lord, also taken from the Gospel of Mark (the long version: 14:1—15:47). But this reading is the account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and in Mark’s narrative it is another “hinge moment” on which the gospel pivots - just as the Transfiguration (9:2-8) served as the pivot towards Jerusalem. So too, the moment pivots our attention from the ministry of Jesus to the final events of Holy Week.

The Context

It is good to remember the narrative stream that has brought us to start this last week in the earthly life of Jesus. The narrative is bookended by two stories of the giving or restoration of sight: the gradual healing of a blind man (8:22-26) and the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). In between lies three predictions of the Lord's passion, teachings and lessons about discipleship and the pivotal story of the Transfiguration. All of this meant to help bring to focus the deeper meaning of the events that unfold in Holy Week; to help us to see.

Jerusalem was the holy city of God and the details of Jesus' arrival there in the other gospels point to the coming of Israel's Prophet-Savior (e.g., "See, your king shall come ... riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass," Zech 9:9). Yet Mark does not so explicitly reference Zechariah as does Matthew in Mt 21:5. If the crowds had received words of Jesus' actions in Jericho of restoring sight to Bartimeaus, maybe they are tentatively making the connection that Jesus was the longed-for Savior of Israel. The verse echoes Isaiah's prophecy: "*On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book; And out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly will ever find joy in the LORD, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.*" (Isaiah 29:18-19) It is clear that the people anticipate the arrival of the promised kingdom: "*Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!*" But it is less clear (in Mark) that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Jerusalem was also the city of Jesus' death, Mark is quick to play down the enthusiasm surrounding Jesus' entry: "*the whole city was shaken*" at his entry. (Matt 21:10) Consequently, the way Mark presents this episode allows his readers to rejoice in the signs of the Kingdom present among them while not allowing them to forget the cost of being his disciples, namely, that they must deny their very selves, take up their cross, and follow in Jesus' steps.

Conflating Accounts

The events of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are so familiar to us that we often conflate all the different accounts into one narrative. For example, our recollections of the entry into Jerusalem always includes the waving of palms, but read the account again: *Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.* It is the Gospel of John that tells us palms were waved; actually, the Markan story uses a word that can refer to any leafy branch or field cutting. Does that make a difference? Actually, yes. According to scholars, the waving of branches would indicate the arrival of a king. While spreading greens upon the road are an act of greeting pilgrims arriving at the holy city. What Mark wants the reader to "see" is not fully revealed in the entry gospel, but only in the fullness of the unfolding events of Holy Week.

Pilgrimage's End

Some scholars hold that Mark only hints at the connection to Zech 9:9 and thus marks this moment not as the entry of the king into his city, but as the greeting of pilgrims. The reason for this is that the crowd's greeting of Jesus and his travel companions combine two pilgrimage psalms: Ps 118:26 and Ps 148:1.

When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives... Jesus and his companions were traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem. Although the distance is perhaps 12 miles, it is the elevation change and environment that makes the journey arduous. The majority of the journey is through barren wilderness: dry and inhospitable. The elevation moves from 800 feet below sea level to 3000 feet above sea level. It was a "camino" of its days and notable pilgrim groups were greeted as they arrived for the high holy days of the Jewish festivals, none higher or holier than Passover.

The geographical comment “Bethphage and Bethany” note that Jesus has entered the precincts of the Holy City and now within the precincts, preparation for the Passover may begin. The reference to the Mount of Olives, although outside the city proper, was considered as the place of the future eschatological revelation of God’s glory (Zech. 14:1–9; cf. Ezek. 43:2–9)

The Colt

Jesus “sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone should say to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ reply, ‘The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.’”

There are commentaries that hold up this passage as one in which Jesus demonstrates supernatural knowledge of a future event. Perhaps true, but there is a simpler explanation: the owner of the colt was part of the pilgrimage with Jesus and had already agreed to the use of the colt. Notice that the two disciples are given words to say to “anyone” rather than the owner. A simple explanation is to assure onlookers that the colt will be returned. Later while retrieving the animal there is no encounter with the owner; the presumption is that he was not present in the village when the disciples came

The more aspect of these verses is “tethered on which no one has ever sat.” William Lane [The Gospel of Mark, 395] offers this insight:

The description of the colt as one which had never been ridden is significant in the light of the ancient provision that an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be one that had not been put to ordinary use (cf. Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; 1 Sam. 6:7). This detail emphasizes the appropriateness of the colt for the sacred task it will perform and characterizes Jesus’ entry as a symbolic action possessing profound messianic significance.

The apparently disproportionate length at which the incident of the untying of the colt is related (verses 1–6) suggests that far more is involved than merely the preparation for the entry. The attention given to this phase of the action and the explicit reference to “a colt tied,” with its allusion to Gen. 49:11, points to a deeper significance:

⁸ “You, Judah, shall your brothers praise —your hand on the neck of your enemies; the sons of your father shall bow down to you.⁹ Judah, like a lion’s whelp, you have grown up on prey, my son. He crouches like a lion recumbent, the king of beasts—who would dare rouse him?¹⁰ The scepter shall never depart from Judah, or the mace from between his legs, While tribute is brought to him, and he receives the people’s homage.¹¹ He tethers his donkey to the vine, his purebred ass to the choicest stem. In wine he washes his garments, his robe in the blood of grapes.

The allusion to Gen. 49:11 raises the idea of the messianic character which the animal bears in this exchange. It also indicates that the untying of the colt was itself a messianic sign, although it was not recognized as such at that time. In addition, even in pre-Christian times Gen. 49:10 was interpreted messianically. This interpretation is reflected in the designation “the Coming One” or “He who comes.” It may then give context for understanding the jubilant chant of verse 9, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” supplied by Ps. 118. The passage in Genesis 49 speaks of one whose coming brings messianic fulfillment to Israel and connects his coming with an ass tied to a vine.

“So they brought the colt to Jesus and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it.” There is no need to make too much of this action other than a simple covering; however, it does match well with the actions that soon follow: *Many people spread their cloaks on the road.*

Giving Homage

Spreading their cloaks on the road is taken as an act of profound respect. There are many examples of similar actions in ancient texts. With direct connection to Jewish tradition it reminds one of the royal homage given to King Jehu in 2 Kings 9 or that given to Simon, the last of the five Hasmonean brothers in 1 Macc 33. William Lane [The Gospel of Mark, 396-397] notes: “A note of jubilation and excitement is evident in the text. Yet the action described does not appear to possess a messianic significance, for there is no explicit acknowledgment of Jesus’ majesty in the acclamation of verses 9–10. It was a brief moment of enthusiasm outside the city walls which would have been appropriate to a royal enthronement, but was scarcely distinguishable from the exultation which characterized other groups of pilgrims when the City of David, with its magnificent Temple, came into view.”

Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!¹⁰ Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!”

The people are chanting one of the great psalms of ascent to the Holy City. The Hallel Psalms (Ps. 113–118) were used liturgically in connection with Passover and Tabernacles, serving as a focus for prayer, praise and thanksgiving for every pious Jew. “Hosanna” is properly a prayer invoking God’s saving action (“save us”), but through liturgical use it came to be dissociated from its original meaning and could be used as a shout of acclamation (like “Hallelujah”) or as a greeting in addressing pilgrims or a respected rabbi. In Ps. 118:26 a blessing is pronounced upon the pilgrims who have come up to the festival, and this is perhaps the normal way to understand the verse. “Blessed in the name of the Lord be he who comes” formed part of a customary form of religious greeting. Yet the formulation is ambiguous and Mark may well have intended his readers to detect a deeper, messianic significance in the phrase “he who comes in the name of the Lord” (cf. Gen. 49:10).

The rabbis interpreted Ps. 118:25 with reference to David or to the final redemption, and this understanding appears to explain the reference to “the kingdom of our father David” in v.10. The substance of the antiphonal response is provided in the fourteenth of the Eighteen Benedictions (Palestinian recension) when prayer was offered daily for the restoration of the kingdom of David. The final Hosanna (Save us, thou who dwellest in the highest) is an appeal for God to inaugurate the era of salvation. The verse expresses a popular type of messianic hope without identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Despite the enthusiasm of their homage, there is no awareness on the part of the people that the time of fulfillment has actually arrived and that the Kingdom has actually drawn near in the person of Jesus himself (cf. Ch. 1:14f.).

With that, in v.11, Jesus enters the city.

Image credit: G. Corrigan, CANVA, CC-BY

Sources

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007).

R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989).

John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina v.2 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer / Liturgical Press, 2001)

Wilfred Harrington, *Mark*, The New Testament Message, v.4 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer Press, 1979)

William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974)

Philip Van Linden, C.M., "Mark" in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, ed. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 907

PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 8 of The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1994)

Ben Worthington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001) 86

David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)..

Brian Stoffregen, CrossMarks Christian Resources, available at www.crossmarks.com/brian/

Dictionaries

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)

Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990)

The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins and Astrid B. Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

Scripture

The New American Bible available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/bible>