



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

Palm Sunday: The Anti-Triumphal Entry

As has become the pattern for the group, help make participants feel welcome and motivated for what lies ahead, then begin with the following prayer:

O God, make me discontented with things the way they are in the world and in my own life. Make me notice the stains when people get spilled on. Make me care about the slum child downtown, the misfit at work, the people crammed into psychiatric institutions, the men, women and youth behind bars. Jar my complacency, expose my excuses, get me involved in the life of my city and the world. Give me integrity once more, O God, as we seek to be changed and transformed,

with a new understanding of our common humanity.

—Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, HarperOne, 2012, p. 83.

This study could well be fraught with difficulty, since the text is so well known and the accompanying mental images are so strong. It is, however, precisely because of the familiarity that the text has lost much of its startling impact. Let us try to help the church be astonished once again. This is a very important passage if we are to understand what happened to Jesus and why it turned out the way it did.

Ask one of the participants to read the following text. After allowing for a period of quiet reflection, have the passage read again, by another voice, and if possible, in a different translation.

Mark 11

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

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.

In buzz groups of two to three people, discuss the following questions:

- 1) What image or picture does this passage create for you?
- 2) What question(s) or difficulties does the passage raise for you?

Take the time to record images, thoughts and issues that emerge. It is important for participants to know they are heard and their opinions valued.

Next, consider the passage in the broader literary context of Mark and in the historic context Jesus lived in.

Remember earlier in the series we looked at the fact that Caesar was not simply known as the Emperor, but also carried several titles of a more theological nature: Son of God, Saviour, Lord, Prince of Peace.

Remember also that the term "gospel" in the historic context was generally applied to the imperial might of Caesar. The "good news" was associated with his might and military victories, and the economic and political stability that would follow. Peace and prosperity followed victory.

A look at a few pertinent passages from Mark might help to clarify how this fits into the broader literary and historic context.

Mark 1:1

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

From the first sentence of the gospel, Jesus is set in opposition to Caesar!

And again...

Mark 1:14–15

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar are being set in opposition to one another. N.T. Wright, a brilliant contemporary theologian, states that this is a time to unlearn our normal understandings and see that when Jesus says, “Repent and believe the gospel”, he is not telling people to turn away from their sinfulness here, but rather saying, “Give up your agendas and trust me for mine.” He was inviting them to follow his vision of what it meant to be in a Torah relationship with God and those around them. He offered them his version of being Israel, his vision of the kingdom and his way of making that a full and present reality.

—*The Meaning of Jesus*, Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, HarperOne, 2007, pp. 38–39.

Mark 8:29–35

He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For

you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Taking up one’s cross and following Jesus was an invitation to follow him in his very risky mission that would very likely end in his and their suffering and perhaps death. The disciples either couldn’t, or didn’t want to, believe this—there had to be a simpler, easier, safer way to get it done.

And again...

Mark 9:7

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

The words “Listen to him!” really are a statement that what Jesus says is what must be. There is no easy way to challenge the structures that tear down and destroy humanity.

And again...

Mark 9:30–32

Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will

rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus is doing his level best to make it plain—this is not about power, prestige position and imperial glory. But they couldn't/wouldn't get it.

In plenary, discuss the following questions:

- 3) With the benefit of some historic context and literary context, what new thoughts or understandings emerge?
- 4) Does this give a slightly different image of the entry into Jerusalem?

Record the highlights of the conversation. This may require some teasing out on the part of the facilitator.

A Teaching Moment

For many, if not most of us who grew up in the church, Palm Sunday was full of exciting pageantry. We waved our palm branches while we traipsed around the building, singing triumphal hymns. It was, it appeared, a day of excitement, endorsement and celebration. Jesus was coming to town, and the excitement was beyond belief. How it all went wrong was a bit complicated, but Palm Sunday felt good, almost as good as Easter. Then the shift came and the focus of the day liturgically became the crucifixion (an assumption that people wouldn't flock to church on Good Friday, I suspect). The Liturgy of the Palms evolved into the warm-up for the Passion Narrative. That is terribly unfortunate, since the Passion cannot really be understood as a stand-alone event. The entry into Jerusalem and the events that followed are integral to an understanding of why Jesus died in the manner he did. Some background information might enhance the picture.

I find the scenario as described by Borg and Crossan in *The Last Week* to be both historically and

biblically plausible and strongly compelling. They describe the "two" dramatic processions that would have entered Jerusalem at roughly the same time in anticipation of the Passover. One saw Pilate, leading his military procession from his base in Caesarea Maritima, with all of the pomp, pageantry and military might of Rome on display. Their mission was to reinforce the garrison in Jerusalem. A clear statement had to be made to the throngs assembling for the Passover celebration. It is Caesar's world. Caesar is in charge here. Behave! From the opposite direction, coming from the Mount of Olives, Jesus and his followers approached the city. Pilate on a warhorse, Jesus on a donkey—and not just a donkey, but a colt. His feet may have been touching the ground as he rode. One procession, Pilate's, was a triumphal entry. Jesus' entry was somewhat different.

Borg and Crossan claim that Jesus' entry was a pre-arranged political and theological statement that countered Pilate's:

The meaning of the demonstration was clear to all those who observed it because it used the symbolism from Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. It is implicit in Mark's telling and quite explicit in Matthew's (21:5). Zechariah said that a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion) from the Mt. of Olives, "humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of an ass" (Zech. 9:9). Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire of the one who claimed to be the son of God, saviour and lord. Jesus' entry was about a different kingdom—the Kingdom of God.

—*The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne, 2006, pp. 2–5.

Once again, Jesus is put in the centre of the contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. The contrast is about to become a collision.

On another note, it might well be useful to understand a few things about Jerusalem in general

and the temple in particular. Gerald West offers these observations:

The Temple was not a religious institution only. First, the Temple ordered each person's status in the social order. The outer walls of the Temple identified the holy people, Israel, setting this people aside from all others. Within the Temple there were separate courts for women, men, priests, and the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest entered. Significantly, the sick, the maimed, and mutilated, the mentally and physically disabled, and "unclean" women were excluded from Temple worship. Second, the Temple ordered time through its annual cycle of festivals, including The Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths, Passover, and many more. Third, the Temple ordered the political life of Israel. After the Roman procurator, the High Priest was the most powerful individual in occupied Palestine. The High Priest controlled the governing body of the Temple and the high Council of the Sanhedrin. The 70 members of the Sanhedrin (a sort of Parliament under the Roman procurators) were drawn largely from the chief priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes—all were closely connected to the Temple. Finally, the Temple ordered the economic life of Israel. In fact, groups that were hostile to the Temple, focus on the economic dimension of the Temple system. They saw a corrupted Temple, mainly because it compromised "for the sake of riches," and piled up money and wealth by plundering the people and taking their lands.

As Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem, surrounded by those who followed him (largely peasants!), he was approaching the forces of the domination system that oppressed Israel (and indeed much of the known world) and the centre of the religious system that was in collaboration with them. Interestingly, this first highly symbolic act, according to Mark's

timeline, was followed by the "cleansing of the Temple." A one-two punch directed at the system that oppressed God's people.

Finally, it is perhaps significant to note that the etymological meaning of "Hosanna" is "save us, please" or "help us, please."

With all this information in mind, in small groups discuss the following question:

- 5) When this contextual information is put together with Mark's account of the entry into Jerusalem, how do you see the impact of this moment in time in terms of shaping the last week of Jesus' life?

Record any insights that emerge.

Taking It Home

Share this quote from Diana Butler Bass:

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus' followers did not just sit around the campfire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, and what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently.

It is profoundly important to grasp this. Jesus and his followers were poor; the vast majority of them were politically and religiously oppressed. There was little reason for them to hope for a better world, that the Romans would just let them be, or that the next ruler would change things. They were victims of one of history's

most vicious empires; they lived in utterly hopeless circumstances...Jesus did not tell them to have faith. He pushed them into the world to practice faith. The disciples did not hope the world would change. They changed it. And in doing so, they themselves changed.

—*Christianity after Religion*, Diana Butler Bass, HarperOne, 2012, pp. 207–80.

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- 6) It is clear that Jesus' mission and ministry was in and amongst the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed. Why is it that in our Canadian context these are precisely the people who seem to feel excluded from and unwelcomed by mainline churches? Do you see a disconnect?
- 7) Is the church in our context a group that "sits around the fire listening to lectures on theology"? Are we about having faith or being pushed out in the world to practise faith?
- 8) What might God be calling us, begging us to be about as followers of "The Way"? What action is our text calling us to enter into?

As always, record the highlights of conversations. Push a bit around the question of action growing out of understanding.

Take the opportunity to thank and affirm the participants and close by repeating the opening prayer:

O God, make me discontented with things the way they are in the world and in my own life. Make me notice the stains when people get spilled on. Make me care about the slum child downtown, the misfit at work, the people crammed into psychiatric institutions, the men, women and youth behind bars. Jar my complacency, expose my excuses, get me involved in the life of my city and the world. Give me integrity once more, O God, as we seek to be changed and transformed, with a new understanding of our common humanity. Amen.

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