

“The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus”

The Final Week

Matthew 21-27

John Breon

“Who is this?” We’ve heard the disciples ask this question about Jesus. Now, the city of Jerusalem sees this figure riding on a donkey. He is acclaimed by crowds of people who throw cloaks and tree branches on the road in front of him. They are shouting words of praise and calls for deliverance from the Psalms. The whole city is stirred and asks, “Who is this?”

The Gospel writers spend more time on the last week of Jesus’ life than any other part of his life and ministry. God wants us to get this story. As we make our way through the account of this week we can see more of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

What we call the “Triumphal Entry” on Palm Sunday is not a “triumph” like the Romans celebrated when their military leaders returned from battle. Jesus enters Jerusalem as king, but as a different kind of king. He doesn’t ride a great white horse like a warrior. Instead, he rides a donkey as the Prince of Peace. He identifies with King David, who rode a donkey or a mule (2 Samuel 16:2). He fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah who declared that Zion’s king would come to the city, gentle and riding on a donkey (Zech 9:9). Jesus is Messiah, the King. But he’s not a conquering hero; he’s the Prince of Peace whose kingdom is built on the power of love.

There were likely other processions into Jerusalem around the same time as Jesus made his way into the city. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, came to the city from the west to be in charge during Passover. He would have been accompanied by ranks of Roman soldiers in a display of power and control. King Herod Antipas would have entered from the north with his own soldiers. He ruled the areas north and east of Judea and, like Pilate, he often used violence to suppress the people.

Two of the three rulers entering Jerusalem in parades on that Palm Sunday were iron-fisted men known for their cruelty. They were

perfectly willing to kill in order to hold power, and they used impressive shows of force to demonstrate that fact.

Jesus, on the other hand, had no soldiers. He led a ragtag band of followers who waved palm branches as he passed by on a donkey. Wisam Salsaa, a modern-day Palestinian artisan, historian, and guide, describes Jesus' parade as history's first nonviolent demonstration. This demonstration was for a king and kingdom built upon a radical desire to love God and a commitment to love one's enemies. (Adam Hamilton, *The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus* 139, 143)

Jesus comes into the city as the humble and peaceful ruler. Then he enters the temple as the Lord of all. People who traveled to Jerusalem from outlying areas or far-away places had to buy animals to sacrifice. And they had to use temple currency to buy in the temple courts. So there was a business of exchanging currency and selling animals. The money changers and animal sellers were set up in the part of the temple area called the Court of the Gentiles. It was a place where non-Jewish people were supposed to be able to come and pray to the Lord. But the place of prayer had been turned into a market, a bazaar, filled with distractions that would make prayer and worship difficult. So Jesus drives out the money changers and the animal sellers, overturning their tables and benches. He cites prophets as he does this. Through Isaiah, God called Israel to be a light to the nations and to have a place for all peoples to pray. Jeremiah pronounced judgment on the temple and Jerusalem because the people were simply trusting the temple's presence instead of trusting God.

Do we forget what our purpose is or what the church is for? We're not here for ourselves. We're to be a house of prayer that introduces others to the Lord we serve.

While Jesus is in the temple, the blind and lame come to him and he heals them. The Law had excluded blind, lame and deformed people from entering the sacred place. Jesus welcomes them and heals them there.

The next day, Jesus and the disciples return to Jerusalem from Bethany where they spent the night. On the way, Jesus goes to get figs off a tree. But the tree has only leaves. It gives the appearance of being fruitful,

but it has no fruit. So Jesus curses the tree and it withers. The immediate lesson for the disciples is what can be accomplished through faithful prayer. But the cursing of the fig tree is also an enacted parable that gives the same message as clearing the temple. The fig tree represents the temple and the religious system there that no longer bore the fruit God wanted. They had become ingrown, self-sufficient.

Again, what about us? Are we bearing the fruit of witness and service and changed character that Jesus is looking for? Or are we content to look like we have life and that we're bearing fruit for God's kingdom when we're really empty?

Jesus also comes to the temple as the teacher with authority. Throughout his ministry, people have been amazed at the authority of his teaching. He didn't come quoting lots of earlier scholars. He spoke out of the authority he has as God's Son and Messiah. Here, some of the chief priests question his authority. He turns the challenge back on them by asking whether they believe John the Baptist was sent from God. They can't answer because if they say God did send John, Jesus can ask, "Why didn't you listen to him then?" And if they would believe John, who was Jesus' forerunner, they would have to believe Jesus. But if they say John didn't come from God, they will be in trouble with all the people who believed John was a prophet. So they take the political out of "no comment."

Then we have a series of Jesus' teachings, many in answer to questions different groups asked him. There are some parables that challenge the religious leaders. In one (21:33-46), Jesus recounts Israel's history of refusing to listen to God's messengers and failing to bear the fruit of righteousness. "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (43). We're back to the figless fig tree. This reinforces the idea that cursing the fig tree is a sign of judgment on the empty religious system.

There's another great line here that says the chief priests and Pharisees knew Jesus was talking about them in the parable (21:45). Can we perceive that he's talking about us as well?

What's our vineyard? It's our life, our work, all that we call our own. In the church, it's the mission and ministry that God has entrusted to us to

carry out with God's power. We have to recognize that it belongs to God, give God glory and bear kingdom fruit.

Jesus' answer to a question about taxes is interesting. He says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" (22:21). The coin they showed Jesus bore Caesar's image, so it should be returned to him. What bears God's image? Or, *who* bears God's image? We do. We return to God what has God's image—ourselves.

A Pharisee asks Jesus what the greatest commandment in the law is. Jesus replies, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." This sums up all the Law and the Prophets and really is a summary of Jesus' teaching.

Then some Sadducees come with a question about resurrection. The Pharisees believed that God would raise people from death someday. The Sadducees didn't. Jesus agreed with the Pharisees on this one. Responding to those who challenged belief in resurrection, Jesus refers to God's appearing to Moses at the burning bush and identifying himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." God wouldn't claim to be the God of those who no longer exist. "God's faithfulness to his covenant demands that if he is their God after death, death is not the final word for them" (Craig Keener, *InterVarsity Press Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*). Can we believe that God will be faithful to us through death and beyond?

Finally, Jesus asks the Pharisees a question. He shows that he, the Messiah, is not just David's son (or descendant), but David's Lord. As one of our hymns says, Jesus is "great David's greater Son" ("Hail to the Lord's Anointed," *The United Methodist Hymnal* #203).

Chapter 23 is all about hypocrisy and Jesus' warning against it. He calls his followers to serve humbly and to be consistent—the same inside and out. The scribes and Pharisees paid attention to the law's details. That wasn't bad. It was actually o.k. But they had missed the main point, "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (23:23).

Chapters 24 and 25 deal with the future. Some of what Jesus talks about here is already past for us. He warns about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. This happened in A.D. 70 when the Romans crushed a Jewish rebellion. Some of what Jesus talks about in these chapters is still in the future for us. The key is to be watchful and prepared. Jesus tells a series of parables that speak of the future of God's kingdom (roughly parallel to the series of parables about the presence of the kingdom in chapter 13).

We don't know when Jesus will return, but we can always be prepared for his appearing by receiving his wisdom and living in his presence, being faithful with the responsibilities he's entrusted to us, and serving him as we serve "the least of these brothers and sisters of his."

Jesus sees what is coming and tells his disciples again that he will be crucified. The chief priests and elders (the ruling council) begin to scheme how they can get rid of Jesus.

At a home in Bethany, a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfumed oil. Again, the disciples misunderstand what's happening. Jesus defends the woman's action, saying that she has anointed him for burial and that she will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. And she is. This probably happened on Wednesday. The scent of this act of kindness would have lingered with Jesus through all that he would endure over the next two days.

Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, goes to the chief priests and arranges to hand Jesus over to them.

Jesus and his disciples celebrate the Passover together. He sends disciples to prepare for Passover—buying the lamb, arranging the room, and so forth. At the same time, Jesus is preparing to be the true and final Passover lamb. As he shares the meal and tells the disciples that the bread and wine represent his body and blood, Jesus points to the fulfillment of all this in God's kingdom. The Lord's Supper not only points back to God's delivering us and it not only represents Christ's presence with us now, but it also points forward to God's great feast, "the marriage supper of the Lamb," when all of God's people will be gathered in fellowship and joy.

Before all that glory comes suffering. Jesus is about to endure betrayal, denial and desertion by those closest to him. He will struggle in

prayer with surrendering to God's will. He will suffer humiliation and pain in his arrest and trials before the Jewish council and the Roman governor Pilate. He will suffer the agony and humiliation of being crucified. He will cry out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus goes as far and as deep as possible to rescue us, to redeem us, to save us. Jesus suffers and dies to deliver us from sin and bondage and to make us God's people.

At the moment of Jesus' death, there is an earthquake and the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. That curtain, which hid God from people and kept people out, is torn open. The death of Jesus reveals God to us and opens access to God for us. We can now draw near— forgiven and free—, enter into God's presence, and find new life with God.

Tony Campolo tells about meeting a man who was sad and depressed. He looked like he had forgotten how to laugh. Tony asked if there was anything he could do to help. Throughout the conversation, Tony felt like he was being led to say the things that needed to be said.

The man opened up and began talking about what he was feeling, actually, how he was unable to feel very much at all. Realizing the man's problem was deeper than he could handle, Tony referred him to a friend of his who was a therapist and counselor. The man agreed to go see Tony's friend.

A few weeks later the man called Tony. He was grateful for how the therapist was helping him. He wasn't out of his depression, but he was discovering some of its causes. He went on to say that the therapy was doing some very good things for him, but he needed something more. He wanted to talk to Tony about that.

They got together for a meal. The man was ready to hear what Tony had to say. Tony told him about Jesus and what Jesus had done on the cross. He talked about Jesus taking the penalty for our sin, about how Jesus can get into our lives and cleanse us from sin.

He told him that, in some mysterious way, Jesus on the cross could spiritually reach forward in time, invade his heart and mind, and absorb out of him all the dark things about himself that he had come to recognize and confess during his counseling sessions. He talked about what God provided through the cross of Jesus and how we need to receive what God provides.

He told the man that if he would yield to Christ, Jesus would absorb out of him all the sin and guilt that were weighing him down emotionally.

Jesus on the cross is not only an objective event that occurred two thousand years ago, but because Jesus was and is God, the crucifixion is an event that subjectively is happening right here and now. Because Jesus is God, when He hung on the cross two thousand years ago, He could see and experience [you and me right here right now]. And at this very instant, if you will let Him, He will absorb into His own body and personality everything about you that is sinful. All your guilt will be drained out of you. Like a sponge, He will absorb it. Like a magnet, He will at this very moment pull out of you and into Himself all the sin and guilt of your life as though they were iron filings. You can be cleansed and freed from all this spiritual junk that has weighed you down and destroyed your enthusiasm for life.

Tony began to pray with the man. And the man prayed, "Jesus, You know my sins, and I know my sins. I want to be released from them. Please take them. I beg You."

When they finished praying, the man was changed. He was radiant. He just sat silently for a minute. Then he began to say over and over, "Thank you!"

Tony said, "You're welcome." But the man said, "Oh, I wasn't talking to you. ...There is an incredible lightness to me. I feel like I want to run and jump. There's a happiness I'm feeling that is about to explode."

People come to such an experience in different ways, some suddenly and some gradually.

But what is always the case is that Christian conversion involves surrender. The transition into a new life in Christ occurs when a person consciously acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord of all life. It always involves a "letting go." It comes, not because you are willing to do something for Jesus, but because you are willing to let Jesus do something to you. (*Carpe Diem*, ch 16)

Will we surrender to the God who loves us, to Jesus who died for us, to the Holy Spirit who is here now to make real all that Jesus did for us?