

Palm Sunday - March 29, 2015

Mark 11: 1-7

Commentary

Why is a strange little drama about securing a young donkey, playing out amidst the preparations for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem? What is it doing there?

It makes no difference to the outcome of the story since the donkey is allowed to be used anyway. So why is it there?

Often I omit this little drama when the passage is used for the Call to Worship and Palm Parade. However the interesting thing, it's not the owner but the bystanders who allow the colt to be taken by total strangers. The key reason for this unthinkable breach of etiquette is "The Master has need of it."

This gives us the first glimpse at just how significant Jesus' kingdom movement has become. Mark wants us to know that the Jesus movement approaching Jerusalem is now big enough, significant enough to be common knowledge and readily welcomed by the common folk, of the Holy City. Just say the Master and everyone knows it is Jesus! Just say "The Master needs it" and even the bystanders will allow them to use someone else's private property. That's like loaning someone else's car parked on your street, to total strangers you catch trying to break into it, just because they say their leader needs it. Now, if that leader is a local hero or an important person everyone is expecting, well then just maybe!

For some reason we seem to get the idea that Jesus acted alone. Sure he had twelve disciples. But we seem to forget the crowds that followed him, day by day, and how whole villages and towns would turn out to have their loved ones healed and restored. Mark tells us that King Herod knew about Jesus because his name had become well known at the royal court. Herod feared that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. This was long before the feeding miracles and the crowds that flocked to Jesus after that. Jesus was up to something significant and he was finally bringing it to the religious authorities, on the high festival days, at the Holy City. Mark wants us to know that both the locals and the authorities were well aware of Jesus and most were ready to receive him.

However, when we overvalue this information and when we overlook the danger to the populace of Roman military occupation, we turn the story into a triumphal entry, into a spectacle of biblical proportions. This can be dangerous.

Commentary

Now we get to see just how significant Jesus' kingdom movement has become. Starting from Jericho early in the morning Mark tells us a large crowd accompanies Jesus and the disciples, as they climb up the mountain to Jerusalem. Much of the large crowd has followed him from Galilee. It has been building at each stop along the Pilgrimage way to the Passover celebration. With each passing day he has won more and more pilgrims over to his Kingdom Movement. From the Mount of Olives the final procession into Jerusalem begins.

Jesus enters the city with people lining the road in makeshift fashion with cloaks and palm branches reminiscent of Psalm 118, depicting a jubilant crowd streaming up to the Temple altar with palms of peace. Now there is a crowd going before Jesus and a crowd following behind all shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of God." The city folk come out to see what is going on and presumably join in. The message is loud and clear. It is not military spectacle but humble celebration. Riding in on a lowly young donkey is not the spectacle of brute force but the beauty of humility coming in peace. The message is intended to invite others to join in, in the same vein. This letting go of spectacle for humility makes a big impression on the locals and leaders alike. We also need to let go of spectacle and be impressed by the humility Jesus reveals.

Commentary

The purpose of this provocative display was to invite and win to discipleship both the local people and the political leaders. The politicians would need a large, enthusiastic, viable expression to take Jesus' Kingdom movement seriously. Jesus wants to make sure that no one gets the wrong idea.

He comes with "the hope, peace, joy, love and Wisdom of God's New Day" so he lets go of any semblance of self-serving spectacle and fully embraces the beauty of humility. All the symbols and actions reflect this beautiful humility. Palm branches, borrowed transportation, a lowly young donkey; a patchwork of ragged garments strewn along the road, common folk responding with peaceful images in their hands: the hope, peace, joy, love and Wisdom of God's New Day.

Jesus enters humbly for all to see.

He hides nothing; he risks everything, even his own life, in the cause of winning the nation to discipleship of God's New Day.

He creates a situation where the leaders cannot sit on the fence. Will they choose the power of spectacle or the beauty of humility?

Crowds in the streets in a capital city are a challenge to any government. A choice must be made and be made soon.

No room for misunderstanding.

No room for half measures.

The leaders will become either his disciples or his executioners.

At this point their response is still open as Jesus lets go of spectacle for humility, in order to present God's New Day.

Application for Today

When we learn to let go of the self-importance of spectacle and choose the humble way forward, we too reveal God's New Day today.