

Holy Week as Recorded in the Gospels
Session #1: Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem

The Journey to the Cross Begins / The Confession of Peter (Mt. 16:13-28; Mk. 8:27-9:1; Lk. 9:18-27)

The turning point in the ministry of Jesus was the confession of Peter that Jesus was the Christ (Anointed One, Messiah - see Matthew 16:13, Mark 8:27, Luke 9:18 – John doesn't record this story). Jesus had taken his disciples on retreat to the far north, to Caesarea Philippi, the source of the Jordan River, in order to teach them, and it is here that Peter makes his confession of faith in Jesus as Christ. Immediately following that event, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem ("set his face to go to Jerusalem" – Luke 9:51). His intent is to be in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, but Jesus is aware of the events to come. He begins to reveal to them that he will suffer, die, and be raised in three days. Then they set out on the long trek from Caesarea Philippi in the north, to Jerusalem in the south, by way of Jericho (Zacchaeus) and Bethany (Lazarus). Along the way, he tries to prepare his followers for what was ahead, but they misunderstand. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus goes straight to Jerusalem. Luke adds additional material.

Fully 1/3 of the synoptics, and 1/2 of John is devoted to the story of Jesus' final week. Certainly, they saw these events as the decisive events in the Gospel.

The Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem (Mt. 21:1-9; Mk. 11:1-10; Lk. 19:28-38; John 12:12-19)

Traditionally, the church has taught that the crowds that first Palm Sunday were surprised at the arrival of Jesus, that his coming to Jerusalem was unexpected and the demonstration of support spontaneous. This is probably not so. Jesus seems to deliberately "set the stage" for his entry into the city (see the various accounts in the Gospels).

Setting the Stage:

First, he went as far as Bethphage, and then sent two of his disciples ahead to spread the news that he was on his way, and would be riding a donkey. Up to this time, he has sworn his disciples to keep the "Messianic Secret," knowing that the time was not right to announce his identity to the world. A declaration like that would have meant immediate arrest. But now was the time, and everything he did that final week, beginning with his triumphal entry into the Holy City, made a loud statement announcing that he was the Messiah.

Sending Symbolic Messages:

Bethphage is a village on the Mt. of Olives, just east of Jerusalem, separated from the city by the Kidron Valley. Zechariah 14:4 says that, when the Lord will sit in judgment against Jerusalem, he will first stand on the Mt. of Olives. From Bethphage, Jesus rides into the city on a donkey. Zechariah 9:9 prophesies that when the King comes to Jerusalem, he will not be riding a white stallion, but a humble donkey. Matthew, always interested in proving fulfillment of prophecy, bends over backwards to make his account blend with Zechariah, so no one can miss the significance. If Jesus had chosen to ride a horse victoriously into the city, he might have been perceived as a threat to the authorities. But who could justify arresting a meek man riding on a donkey? Yet, by doing so, Jesus was revealing himself to the Jewish crowd.

What Kind of Messiah Were the Jews Expecting?

That depends upon which segment of Jewish society you identified with. In Jesus' day, there were a number of different groups, each expecting a different type of "savior:"

Pharisees:

Phariseism was a lay reform movement which was strong throughout Israel outside of Jerusalem. It was closely tied to the synagogues in the villages. Jesus and the Pharisees spar a great deal but actually agreed on the basics of faith (they differed on the legalism the Pharisees tended toward). This group was often at odds with the Sadducees.

Sadducees:

The Sadducees were the priests who ran the Temple. They were often unpopular with other Jewish elements because they had worked out a symbiotic relationship with the Roman authorities. They were often corrupt.

Essenes:

The Essenes were radical monastics who rejected the Temple as being corrupt. They were apocalyptic in outlook. Some of them lived near the Dead Sea (Qumran) and recorded what we call "The Dead Sea Scrolls." It is not unlikely that John the Baptist was heavily influenced by the Essenes and the Qumran community, perhaps even being raised there.

Zealots:

Zealots were revolutionaries whose main goal was overthrowing the Roman occupation and restoring the independence of the Hasmonean period (a brief moment in history when the Jews were able to rule themselves). The Zealots were waging a guerrilla war against Rome, and eventually led a revolt which was crushed by Rome (70 A.D). As a result, Jerusalem and the Temple was destroyed. During his final week, Jesus predicts this fate for Jerusalem and the Temple.

Each of these groups looked for a different kind of Messiah. Some hoped for a military deliverer (Zealots), others for a priestly King to restore Israel's religious fervor (Pharisees and Sadducees), while others thought the Messiah would be a mystical figure who would usher in a new age (Essenes). It's no wonder that the crowds were so confused and fickle.

The Crowd and the Disciples' Response

Whatever they expected, the Messiah had arrived, and the people were jubilant. They cut palm fronds and waved them as Jesus rode by. This is another example of "political shorthand." The crowds wanted to hail Jesus as their deliverer, but they dared not carry banners or signs. Instead, they cut fronds. The palm tree was the symbol of Jewish nationalism. During the Hasmonean (Maccabean) period, the nation of Israel was independent for a time. They symbol on the coins of that time always included a palm tree (Jewish law forbade the image of a person – a "graven image"). By waving palm fronds, the crowd was telling Jesus, "Do something about Rome this Passover." Signs would have gotten them all arrested, but no one could be arrested for carry a palm branch.

Jesus Arrives at the City

The timing of Jesus' arrival was also meant to carry a message. Rabbis had long taught that the Old Testament figure, Elijah, would return at some future Passover and proclaim the Messiah's arrival. To this day, many Jews leave an empty place at their Passover table for Elijah. This is why "Elijah" plays an important part in the Gospels in relation to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:14; Jn. 1:21-23) and Jesus (Mk. 8:27-30).

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, it is likely he came through the Sushan Gate (which no longer is found in Jerusalem) on the eastern wall of the Temple Mount. "Sushan" was the capital of Persia (where the story of Esther takes place), and the name reminded the people of their captivity in the Exile (by Babylon). It was Cyrus of Persia who defeated Babylon, and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. In Jesus' day, the gate was used for ceremonial occasions, as it was near the Temple. It was especially associated with Messianic hope. Certainly, if Jesus chose this gate to enter the city, the political leaders of Jerusalem would have taken notice.

Luke adds a poignant element to the triumphal entry (Lk. 19:41). It seems that, while the crowd and the disciples are on a "high," Jesus is sad. "I've tried to show them 'Prophet, Priest, and King,' but all they see is 'King.'" Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

Different Accounts of Events

The people expected Jesus to lead a revolt against the Roman garrison, but instead he struck right at the heart of Jerusalem's religious establishment, which was sure to make him unpopular with many. The Gospels do not agree on the sequence of events:

Matthew has Jesus go straight to the Temple and drive out the money-changers, then heal the sick, and return to Bethany on the outskirts of the city (where his close friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live) for the night. The next day he curses the fig tree.

Mark has Jesus go to the Temple, but because it was late in the day (money-changers closed down for the night, so there would not be a crowd to witness the cleansing of the Temple), Jesus returns to Bethany for the night. The next day, he curses the fig tree before going to the Temple to purge it of the money-changers

Luke has Jesus weep as he draws near to the city. He then drives out the money-changers, does NOT return to Bethany (at least Luke doesn't say he does), but instead teaches every day in the Temple. He does NOT curse a fig tree (although later there is a saying about a fig tree).

John, which is not a "synoptic Gospel," has a vastly different chronology. After Jesus rides into Jerusalem, there is no mention of returning to Bethany (Jesus' anointing at Bethany occurs before Palm Sunday rather than after). At Bethany, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and Mary anoints Jesus (Jn. 11 & 12). John has a scene of Jesus cleansing the Temple, but he places it right at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, not here. There is no mention of fig trees.

The Cleansing of the Temple (Mt. 21:12-13; Mk. 11:15-19; Lk. 19:45-48; [Jn. 2:12-25])

Jesus very deliberately engages in a prophetic public act that is sure to get him in trouble and likely seal his fate. Money-changers were not evil in themselves – they served an important function for those who came to the Temple to worship, or to give their offerings. Because pagan coinage had a "graven image," money-changers were needed to exchange pagan coinage for temple currency, so as not to defile the temple. Animals for sacrifice were available for purchase for the convenience of pilgrims who traveled long distances to the Temple – to bring their own from home would be impractical. The problem was that these folks were cheating the people. To make matters even worse, the Chief Priest of the Temple, Annas and his protégé, Caiaphas, owned the booths and controlled the market. Corruption and greed at the heart of the Jewish faith. Jesus could not stand for this perversion of the Temple's purpose. We seldom think of Jesus as being angry or violent, but here we behold righteous anger at work! Jesus must have known the consequence of such an act.

Cursing the Fig Tree

This passage is often troubling for readers of the Gospels as it seems that Jesus is being unjust. What did this poor fig tree ever do to deserve this? Of course, it is another prophetic act passing judgment on the religious establishment.

According to two of the Gospels (Mt. 21:18-22; Mk. 11:12-14,20-26), Jesus curses a fig tree because it has leaves but no fruit (figs come out simultaneously with the leaves). Because of the mild climate, fig trees in Israel produce five times a year; four times producing figs, one time producing "phage." In order for phage to become a fig, moth larvae must be present in the fruit. One of the five producing times, larvae are not present and so the fruit does not become a fig. In the winter, fig trees are barren. Around Passover in the spring they produce yellow/green leaves with this fruit called phage. In the summer it produces dark green leaves with red/purple figs. In the fall the leaves are dusty brown. When the Gospel writers say that it was "not the season for figs," they are right. Around Passover, one would expect to find phage instead of figs. When Jesus looked at the fig tree, he noticed the lack of ripe fruit – fruit that had failed to ripen, and it reminded him of the lack of faith or stunted faith of the Jewish leaders he was encountering. The fig tree with phage becomes a metaphor for Jerusalem, exhibiting all the signs (leaves) of fruit, but only producing stunted fruit.

Interestingly enough, Bethphage, the village where Jesus mounted the donkey for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, literally means, "House of Phage." The unproductive tree received a curse from Jesus' lips, and soon Jerusalem itself would stand under God's judgment (in 70 A.D., the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple). As Jesus said to the fig tree, he could also have said to Jerusalem, "You will never again bear fruit."

Looking Ahead

The teachings and events in the four Gospels between the Triumphal Entry and the Last Supper occur mostly in two locations: The Temple and the Mount of Olives. Next week we will look at these teachings and events. To prepare for this, let's familiarize ourselves with the Temple and the Mount of Olives themselves.

The Temple

For Jews at the time of Jesus, there were 10 areas with degrees of holiness, like concentric circles emanating out from the heart of the Temple (see handout). From least to most holy, they were:

1. Israel
2. Jerusalem

3. The Temple Mount
4. Hasmonean Portions of the Temple Mount (considered more holy than the portions built by Herod the Great - see reference to Solomon's Portico under #6)
5. Court of the Gentiles (the largest courtyard of any temple anywhere, Gentiles were allowed)
6. Court of the Women (both Jewish women and men were allowed – the offerings received there; Jesus - and later the disciples - preferred to teach at "Solomon's Portico" on the eastern edge of the Court of the Women - the most ancient remnant of Solomon's Temple – Jn. 10:23; Acts 3:11;5:12)
7. Court of the Israelites (Jewish men only, no women or Gentiles allowed)
8. Altar (where burnt sacrifices were offered, only priests allowed)
9. Holy Place (only the priests on duty to attend to this area were allowed)
10. Holy of Holies (the Ark of the Covenant resided there, only the High Priest allowed, and only on Yom Kippor – Day of Atonement)

As we said, Jesus preferred to teach from Solomon's Portico (Jn. 10:23). It is also believed that Jesus liked to teach from "The Steps of the Teachers" (the main approach to the Temple Mount) during Holy Week. It is called this because rabbis would come there to teach their disciples and be heard by many people passing by. Paul and the other Apostles probably also taught there. Other sources tell us that Paul's teacher, Rabbi Gamaliel, taught here. (It is also possible that Jesus may have used the Huldah Gate nearby on Palm Sunday.)

Jesus' public sermon to the crowds (Mt. 23) probably occurred on "The Steps of the Teachers" (there were large assembly areas at top and bottom of the stairs). He refers to the hypocrisy of some Pharisees, pointing to the whitewashed tombs on the Mount of Olives right across the valley. He speaks about how they "shut the gate to the Kingdom of Heaven" and may have pointed to Huldah's gate. He also calls them "whitewashed tombs" and may have pointed across the valley to the cemetery on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus moved from the Temple to the Mt. of Olives to continue his teachings (John does not include any of the teaching from the Mt. of Olives). Matthew introduces this sermon of Jesus, referred to as "The Olivet Discourse," with these words: "As he sat on the Mt. of Olives, the disciples came to him privately saying, 'Tell us, when will this be done (the destruction of the Temple), and what will be the sign of the close of the age?'" The sermon Jesus delivers is an apocalyptic discourse about the end times, reminiscent of Revelation, 2 Peter, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Daniel.

The location for this sermon is significant. The Mt. of Olives was so named because of the olive orchards which grew on its slopes. Olive oil was symbolically important in Jewish thought. Not only was it used in cooking, in healing as medicine, and in sacrificial offering to God, it also was used to anoint persons into God's service. In the Old Testament, we see how olive oil was used by prophets to anoint (consecrate) priests and kings. Jewish writings (the Mishna) called for priests to be anointed by olive oil at the time of their vestment for service. In the Old Testament, we see a number of instances when kings (Saul, David, etc.) were anointed, symbolizing their selection by God. And in some denominations today, those baptized or confirmed are also anointed as a sign of God's election.

Because olive oil was identified with prophets, priests, and kings, it also became associated with the messianic expectation of the Jews. The word, "messiah" literally means, "The Lord's Anointed." As mentioned earlier, Zechariah 14:4 says that, when the Lord will sit in judgment against Jerusalem, he will first stand on the Mount of Olives. Many Christians also believe that when Jesus returns in Glory, he will do so first at the Mount of Olives. So it is not insignificant that Jesus chose the Mount of Olives as the setting for a sermon about end times.

The Stage is Set

Jesus has carefully set the stage for what will happen in the week that follows. He is not a victim. He is in control of his own destiny. He traveled to Jerusalem, knowing he would be opposed. He rode into Jerusalem as the Messiah, despite the misguided hopes of the crowd. He purged the Temple, fully aware that to do so probably meant a death sentence. In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, and nothing would stop him... ..not even a cross.