

The Long Ride In (Perfect Storm Series)

The Perfect Storm was about to break over Jerusalem. The Jewish rulers were nervous, plotting, anxious to rid themselves of the menace from Galilee. The Romans were ever present, watchful, knowing that ultimately they must give an account to Caesar for how they kept the peace. And Jesus was coming close now, having raised a furor both *for* Him and *against* Him by raising Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. It was from near Bethany that Jesus sent two of His disciples into the village ahead, probably Bethphage, to untie a colt and bring it back to Him.

The colt was brought, some cloaks thrown over it, the Teacher sat on its back, and the long journey started. No, it wasn't long in distance -- Bethany is no more than 2 miles from Jerusalem -- but it was a huge journey in terms of its significance. Once Jesus mounted that colt and started to ride towards the holy city, there was no turning back from the collision course with Roman Empire and Jewish national hope, the other two elements of the Perfect Storm that we've been looking at for the past three weeks. When Jesus mounted the donkey to begin this ride into Jerusalem He knew where it would take Him -- to the cross.

There are three elements to this story that I would like us to look at today; three seemingly unrelated scenes that depict for us what was at stake. First, there is the response of the crowds. Second, as the group comes in sight of the City, Jesus breaks down and weeps. Third, when He arrives in the city, He attacks the corruption in the temple with violence, overturning tables and chasing the merchants away with a whip. Those are the scenes that show most clearly that Jesus knew where this was leading and that He chose the path anyway. First, the crowds.

So they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for Him to ride on. Then the crowds spread out their coats on the road ahead of Jesus. As they reached the place where the road started down from the Mount of Olives, all of His followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen.

"Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven!"

But some of the Pharisees among the crowd said, "Teacher, rebuke your followers for saying things like that!" He replied, "If they keep quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!" (19:35-40)

Usually, when we hear the word "crowds" we think of a gathering of ordinary folk, an unidentifiable group that just happen to be in the area at the time. But here we are told that the people who instigate these cheering and praising shouts are Jesus' followers. They aren't the only ones to line the road, but they are initiators, helping to create the expectation that something great is happening here.

They start shouting "Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord." We've talked about what that would mean to a Jew of that era. This is referring to God's

return, His coming to save His people, His triumphant return to Jerusalem as King -- the “God is King” motif that we looked at a few weeks back. They were clearly excited that this ride of Jesus into Jerusalem was the long-awaited return of God to rule over His people directly, in person. This is the fulfilment of Zechariah’s prophecy of Judah’s righteous King coming to them, riding on a donkey. And, as if in response to Zechariah’s five hundred year old call to the people of Jerusalem to rejoice greatly, to shout in triumph, those who lined the road were doing just that, “Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” They were reflecting back on the wonderful miracles they had seen and they were projecting forward to the wonderful reign of God that was about to begin. You can feel their excitement, their hope that this time had come. These people were not strangers to Zechariah’s prophecy. They could see what was happening. There was huge excitement in the air as Jesus began the descent into the valley below the walls of the city.

In the middle of such joyful celebration, the interruption from the Pharisees only confirms their gloomy outlook on the day’s events and on Jesus in particular, but it also shows how quickly they took offense, supposedly on behalf of God. “Teacher, rebuke your followers for saying things like that.” In other words, “Come on, Jesus, you should know what is being implied by these shouts and you can’t let them say those kinds of things without shutting them down. You can’t pretend you’re the King, sent from God Himself, coming into the holy city to rule God’s people -- it’s just not right.” And Jesus responds, “If these good folks are shut down, then the stones along the road would burst into shouts of praise.” Jesus is clearly conscious that He is fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament and He is not going to back down and pretend that He’s not. He is the coming King -- He understands that that is His mission and He embraces all of the consequences of that claim.

Now the city itself comes into view and we are greeted by probably the most abrupt change of mood that we’ll encounter in the gospels. From high hopes and the loud cheering of the crowds, we now see Jesus’ eyes welling up with tears as He looks on the city of Jerusalem.

I wish that even today you would find the way of peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from you. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you. They will crush you to the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you have rejected the opportunity God offered you.

(19:42-44)

The NIV puts that last phrase more clearly, “because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” This was the time of fulfilment, the time they had been waiting for for centuries, and when it came, they thought it must be something else, a fraud, a disappointment, or a big mistake.

Missing their saviour was bad enough, but it spelled doom for the city and for the temple and Jesus could clearly see this devastating future. “They will encircle you ... they will crush you ... your enemies will not leave a single stone in place.” And as Jesus looks across the Kidron Valley at the walls of the city of David, at the city where

the temple to Yahweh was built, at the city that had been the host to all the great feasts and celebrations of the Jewish nation, He wept. "It's too late, it's too late for you to find peace."

In the middle of a boisterous crowd that was in the mood for celebrating the coming of their king, Jesus wept at the knowledge that He would be rejected and that His rejection would bring such devastation to the people God had chosen as His own.

We've seen two very different emotions on this journey -- great joy and great grief -- and now we will come across another; great anger.

Then Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants from their stalls. He told them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My temple will be a place of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves." (19:45,46)

Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves. I cannot imagine this being done gently, politely, "excuse me while I dump your change box." This was a violent action and it caused a violent reaction:

After that He taught daily in the Temple, but the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the other leaders of the people began planning how to kill Him (19:47)

What drove Jesus to do the things He did on that day? Why did He ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and why did He drive the merchants out of the temple. It's obvious that both of these things got Him into trouble, so what was the impetus behind them?

The most important reason, I believe, was that He saw Himself as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies about a coming king who would bring with Him God's presence. He saw Himself as the new temple of God, the new location of God's literal presence among His people. He chose to ride in on a donkey because Zechariah had told the Jews that that's how their King would come to them. He knew where this would take Him - the end result of that perfect storm would mean that He would hang on a Roman cross - but He wanted it to be very clear, for that day and for the centuries to come, that He was, in fact, the King of the Jews. We'll see in a few minutes several other of the many ways in which Jesus fulfilled prophecy during this week in Jerusalem.

A second reason for Jesus' actions that day, specifically in the temple, was that He, along with many of the Jews of His day, saw that the system was corrupt. The wrong people were in charge of the temple and they were doing the wrong things there. The money changers of the temple would convert your coins to temple coins at a rate that was very favorable to them. You would then take those coins, along with your lamb or doves to be sacrificed, to the inspector who would likely find a blemish in your animal or bird and then sell you an unblemished one at a high cost.

This was economic oppression, created by the monopoly that these people had to run the temple business. Worse still, the temple was the central bank for the Jews of that day. All records of debts were kept in the temple, the place set aside for the worship of Yahweh. In the great rebellion to come just a few decades later, one of the first things the rebels did was go into the temple and burn all the records of debts -- these had no place in the temple.

There's more. The temple had come to symbolize the nationalist aspirations of the Jews. They had no heart for the vision of the prophets which saw the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem to worship God in His temple. Rather, their heart was to be a powerful nation, defeating their enemies in battle and then keeping them under their feet. Theirs was the vision of Jonah in the Old Testament, rather than the vision of King David. "Wipe out all our enemies, O Yahweh," was the impassioned cry of this generation of Jews, instead of "Let your glory be over all the earth," which David had written in Psalm 57.

Jesus' challenged the current practices, the rule of the corrupt priests in the house of God - and those who were making the profits on the business there were furious. You know the saying, "When they tell you it's not about the money, it's about the money." Well, in Jerusalem in the year 30 A.D., it was at least partly about the money, about the threat to an economic system that was making the rich richer and the poor poorer, much like the system in place today in our world.

Now, as we reflect on the significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, I want to read to you some of the prophetic words that would have been on Jesus' mind during that day, during the weeks leading up to that day, and again during the days that followed. Our next gathering will be a celebration of resurrection -- let's prepare for that now.

From Zechariah:

See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9:9)

Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. (13:7)

Yahweh will be King over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and His name the only name. (14:9)

I told them, "If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter", the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of Yahweh to the potter. (11:12,13)

By the way, 30 pieces of silver was the price to be paid as compensation for a slave that had been killed. To offer that amount of money for the services of one who was living and who had been helping them was an insult, one which God took as being meant for Him, and which was rejected. The 30 pieces of silver are to be thrown away, not into the temple treasury, but to the potter.

They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. (12:10)

From Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? (v. 1)

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: "He trusts in the LORD, let the LORD rescue him." (vv. 6-8)

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. (v. 11) Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. (vv. 16-18)

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and He rules over the nations. (vv. 27,28)

From the prophet Isaiah:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed? He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was Yahweh's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though Yahweh makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of Yahweh will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53)

Psalm 118

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; Yahweh has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes . . . Oh, Yahweh, save us; O Yahweh grant

us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of Yahweh . . . You are my God and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you
(vv. 22,23; 25,26; 28)

There are many more that would have been on Jesus' mind that hour and in the following days. But notice the themes that these passages represent:

1. The King coming to Jerusalem to rule over His people
2. His rejection and suffering
3. The sense of isolation, of absolute loneliness that Jesus must have felt, even among crowds of cheering people.
4. Ultimately the vindication of the suffering servant and the victory of Yahweh over all His enemies.
5. The salvation of a new people of God as the LORD rules over all the nations, all the people groups, on earth.

One of the other passages that Jesus would have thought about is found in Daniel 7.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Jesus knew that the result of this perfect storm would be His own suffering and death. He had told His disciples as much on several occasions. He knew that the outcome for the Jewish people would be disastrous, and so He wept over Jerusalem and the pain that would come their way. He also knew that the Father had a greater purpose and that only His obedience could bring about that greater purpose. And so, as He had done all through His life, Jesus bent His will to the will of the Father, knowing that the greater good was His ultimate desire. The greater good was the eternal kingdom described by Daniel.

Jesus may have come in to the joyful shouts of a crowd welcoming their king, but He also came in humility, as the prophet Zechariah foretold:

Look, your King is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey -- even on a donkey's colt. (9:9)

And the humble king stood silently in front of the harsh accusations of the Jewish ruling class and the calculating and cold might of Rome and they tore Him to shreds. But when your motivation is love and your inspiration is the glory of God, there is no defeat. Jesus surrendered to the powers of this earth in order to defeat the powers beyond this earth, the powers of death and hell, of all rebellion against the holiness and wisdom of God ... and He won -- but that's the story for next Sunday.