

The Royal Visit

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[0 : 0 0] Mark 11, page 823, let's pray. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word, we pray this morning. Speak to our hearts and write it on it, that we may not only believe, but submit to Jesus our King.

Amen. The die is cast. So apparently Julius Caesar said, as he crossed the Rubicon in his conquests, is the Roman emperor, I guess, in the middle of the first century BC.

That is, crossing the Rubicon, the die is cast, the point of no return, there's no turning back. You've come to the point of decision, the decision is made, and you cannot go back on such a decision.

There's a sense in which in Mark's Gospel, as Jesus rides on a donkey into Jerusalem, the die is cast and there is no turning back. Way back in chapter 2, so early in Jesus' ministry, there is already enmity against him.

Then when Jesus healed the man lowered through the roof, the scribes who were looking on muttered about Jesus that he was a blasphemer. And already that sinister note of opposition has been rung.

[1 : 2 6] And then just in chapter 3, still so early in Jesus' ministry, both the Pharisees and the Herodians, not normally friends, but enemies, actually joined together to conspire about how to destroy Jesus.

Not just muttering that he's a blasphemer, but out to destroy him or kill him. So early in Jesus' ministry. And that opposition has been growing like a background rumble through the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus knows that opposition and knows what to expect. If you remember back to chapter 8 in that famous prediction I mentioned two weeks ago, Jesus said on the road at Caesarea Philippi, way up north, far from Jerusalem, said to his disciples then that the Son of Man himself must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed.

And three days later would rise again. And in case his disciples did not understand that prediction, in chapter 9, one chapter later, now heading south towards Jerusalem, having passed through Galilee, Jesus says again to his disciples, 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. And then we saw two weeks ago, for the third time, this prediction, now fleshed out with more detail in chapter 10, verse 33.

[3 : 0 6] See, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles.

They will mock him, spit upon him, flog him and kill him. And after three days, he will rise again.

That final prediction, spoken perhaps just a few days before the events of his arrival in Jerusalem, spoken as Jesus is about to begin the ascent up from Jericho to Jerusalem, locates his opposition in Jewish leadership as well as in Roman or Gentile leadership.

And it locates his death in Jerusalem. So as Jesus rides into Jerusalem in today's passage on a donkey, he knows full well what to expect.

Three times he's predicted his opposition, his death, as well as his resurrection. The die is cast. And yet as Jesus gets on the donkey and rides into Jerusalem, he's in control because he's not going there so much to have his life taken from him as to give his life.

[4 : 21] For if you remember back to chapter 10, verse 45, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In a sense, through Mark's gospel, like in a film or a book, there's been a growing tension towards this confrontation in Jerusalem. The undertones of enmity has been rumbling through the book.

Now Jesus on a donkey arrives in Jerusalem. The die is cast. He's come to confront his enemies. He's come, in effect, to die. These events may, in fact, be on the same day that he healed blind Bartimaeus, the story we saw last week.

Then, perhaps early in the morning, he healed that man as he left Jericho. Eighteen miles later, a steep and fairly tough walk up the hills from below sea level to 2,500 feet above sea level.

Jesus and the crowds have come towards Jerusalem for the festival. And it may well be the very end of that same day, if they'd walked hard enough and done the journey in one day, as many sought to do, to try and avoid sleeping out on that rough and fairly notorious road during the night.

[5 : 39] He's arrived late in the day on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He's come to, firstly, Bethany, and then, just after that, the town of Bethphage, two towns that still exist, although a little bit sort of swamped in suburban Jerusalem to an extent these days.

Bethany is about five kilometres or so from Jerusalem. And on my first trip to Israel some years ago, we actually walked from Bethany, slightly up the hill through Bethphage, over the rise of the Mount of Olives, and then down into Jerusalem and across the Kidron Valley, and then just up a little bit, finally, through the walls of old Jerusalem.

As he approached Bethany or Bethphage, he issued instructions to his disciples. Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you'll 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.

It could be that this is a supernatural knowledge of what the disciples will find, a colt that's never been ridden, tied for them to take. That may well be the case.

[6 : 54] Some say that Jesus has prearranged this with the owner of the colt. That could also be the case. In fact, some say that the owner may well be with Jesus. The word for Lord there is not so much the full-blown Lord God as in the word Master or perhaps Owner.

Now, we're not quite sure, but the disciples do, as Jesus asked, and they find things exactly as Jesus said it would be. They went away.

They found a colt tied near a door outside in the street. As they're untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, what are you doing, untying the colt? And they told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it.

And they brought the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks on it to make a sort of makeshift saddle, and then Jesus sat on the donkey. The occasion is the Passover festival.

That's why the crowds are coming to Jerusalem, one of the three main pilgrimage feasts of Jesus' day, the other two being the Feast of Weeks, or the Greek name for that is Pentecost, seven weeks later, and the third one, the Feast of Tabernacles, in our September-October sort of period of the year.

[8 : 00] The Passover festival commemorated the liberation of Israel from Egypt, from slavery in Egypt, way back about 1400-1500 BC in the time of Moses.

The early chapters of the book of Exodus recount all those events for us. Typically, pilgrims would arrive in Jerusalem on foot. It was the appropriate way of arriving.

So when Jesus gets on a donkey, it is significant that he's going to arrive not on foot. Mounting the donkey is his own initiative. He's not forced to do it by the crowds.

They're not wanting to make a statement about him so much as he making a statement about himself. Jesus is not shying away from drawing attention to himself when he gets on a donkey for the final little bit of the pilgrimage into Jerusalem.

It's not just any donkey. It's a donkey that's never been ridden, we're told. The significance of that is not obvious. In the Old Testament, if an animal was to be used for sacred use, it must never have been used for common use.

[9 : 11] That may be behind the significance here, that this animal, having never been ridden, is appropriate for a special sacred use, that is, for Jesus himself to ride it into Jerusalem.

At Passover festival in particular, there was a heightened expectation that the Messiah long awaited would come. For hundreds of years in the Old Testament, there's been a growing expectation that the Saviour, Messiah, King would come from God and would come at one of the main festivals, not least the festival of Passover or perhaps at Tabernacles.

Here is Jesus making a claim about himself by getting on a donkey, not walking on foot, a donkey that had never been ridden, perhaps signifying a sacred event, and at the time of heightened expectation that the Messiah would come to redeem God's people.

Already remember, last week we saw, maybe at the beginning of this same day, a blind man given his sight by Jesus, Bartimaeus. He followed Jesus and we may assume that he's part of the crowd on this day.

One of those who's been given sight. And if you remember that prophecy from Isaiah 35, I read last week, that associated the redeemed of the Lord, including the blind who now see, the lame who now walk, the deaf who now hear, coming with joy and gladness, with singing and shouting, the redeemed of the Lord to Jerusalem, to Zion.

[10 : 50] It's part of the messianic build-up associated with this event. Jesus is making a claim about himself that he is the long-awaited Messiah of God.

There's more in this passage that points in that direction as well. It's no coincidence that Jesus rides a donkey, a young donkey presumably that's never been ridden, for there is a striking prophecy in the prophet Zechariah that points to this event.

Mark makes no obvious connection. He lets us, the reader, assume it, but in Luke and John we find it made explicit, or is it Matthew rather, it's made explicit. Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion.

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you. Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.

On a colt, the foal of a donkey. Not on a horse, not on a warrior horse, but on a donkey as a humble but victorious king. And in that prophecy, Jerusalem is exhorted to rejoice.

[12 : 03] So here Jesus chooses the foal of a donkey, it seems. A young, unridden donkey. And he's tying together more messianic expectation and pointing it to himself in that event.

And also significantly, in that same prophet Zechariah, in a later chapter 14, he says that this long-awaited Messiah king will come from the Mount of Olives, exactly where Jesus is getting on the donkey, to ride down the Mount of Olives and up into Jerusalem, into its old city.

The crowd seems to recognise this in their deeds and their words. Firstly, they throw their cloaks on the road in honour of Jesus, something that was done in the Old Testament for one of the kings, Jehu, a bad king in fact, but he was honoured in that throwing cloaks in front of him to go along.

It was a Greco-Roman custom as well of honour for their leaders and so on. And even if you remember your British history, I remember being taught of Sir Walter Raleigh, who gallantly took off his cloak and threw it down in the muddy ground for Queen Elizabeth I to walk on.

And the legend has it that he was therefore knighted for that grand act of honour. Well, here are the crowd recognising royalty in Jesus by throwing their cloaks in front of him as he rides on the donkey, taking leafy branches, John's Gospel calls them palm branches.

[13 : 31] Here they're just leafy branches to put on the ground in front of him or wave as an act of honour or homage of the king who's coming. But not only the crowd's actions, also their words indicate their understanding of Jesus as the king, the Messiah king.

They call out Hosanna, a word which we see sometimes in our Christian songs and hymns these days as an acclamation of praise, a bit like hallelujah.

But Hosanna is a call literally to save now, calling on God to save, a plea, a petition initially. But at a time like this, almost a rejoicing of confidence that God will save.

So whilst it's a plea, God save, it's an acclamation trusting that God is about to do it. So in Jesus the king in front of them, as they shout out Hosanna and Hosanna in the highest, they're calling on him and God to save, but they're doing it as a statement of praise and confidence that that's why he's here.

He's come to save us. They go on in verse 9 to say, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. It's a quote from the psalm reading that we had in our first Bible reading, Psalm 118.

[14 : 50] It's no coincidence that that was one of a string of psalms that were often recited at the time of the Passover festival, the Hallel Psalms. And that expectation, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, goes on to be filled out in the next verse, blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.

That is an acknowledgement that Jesus on the donkey coming to Jerusalem is the long-awaited Messiah king descended from David. David had been king a bit over a thousand years before, was the great king of Israel, the archetypal king in a sense, the second king of Israel.

And significantly, it was he who arrived in Jerusalem to conquer it and capture it to be his capital city. Before that day, it was an enclave of the Jebusite people within the land of Israel, unconquered by the Israelites.

When Saul was king, Jerusalem was not his capital. After Saul's death, David became king. For seven years, he reigned from his capital in Hebron, further south. And then after seven years, conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital city.

It was David who set in place the plans to build the temple there, though it was his son Solomon who succeeded him as king, who actually did the building of the temple. After David's death, when Solomon was crowned as king, he arrived into Jerusalem on David's mule or David's donkey.

[16 : 21] So David became the model of expectation for a later Messiah king. In fact, David's name gets used many times later in the Old Testament by way of expressing that expectation that a great king like David, a son of David, a descendant of David, a servant like David, would come to save and rule forever the people of God.

Part of that comes because of the promises God made to David back into Samuel chapter 7. And now here, Jesus on a donkey arrives in Jerusalem, David's capital, still the capital for the people of God in Jesus' day, on a donkey as the king, great David's greater son.

And so the acclamation Hosanna is appropriate. It's a plea and statement of confidence that God would save but most likely the crowds misunderstood how this king would do that.

Their obvious enemy was Rome. Rome ruled in Jesus' day. In 63 BC, about 90 or so years before these events of Jesus, Rome conquered Palestine from the Greeks under Pompey, the Roman general.

And so from that day onwards, there was a growing expectation that somehow God would overthrow Roman rule. Especially that expectation grew in Jerusalem after 6 AD, 25 years before these events in the lifetime of Jesus himself.

[18 : 02] in 6 AD, Judea and Jerusalem was ruled by one of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Archelaus, who was sort of Jewish though not pure Jewish blood.

And if Herod the Great was bad, killing the babies in Bethlehem, etc., Herod Archelaus, one of his sons, was worse. So bad that the Romans even got rid of him and deposed him.

And so from 6 AD onwards, Judea and Jerusalem, its capital, was governed by Romans themselves, prefects or governors. And the one in place in the time of Jesus' death was Pontius Pilate.

No friend of the Jews at all. A hater of the Jews. And so from 6 AD onwards, there was a heightened expectation that God was about to act to bring about his kingdom, to restore it to a descendant of David, to overthrow Roman rule.

At this time, as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, Pilate the governor is there, as we know from the next few chapters. And one of Herod the Great's other sons, who ruled north in Galilee, also a bad egg, the one who put John the Baptist to death, he's also in Jerusalem at this time for the feast.

[19 : 26] This crowd is awaiting eagerly the kingdom of God, of the descendant of David. A kingdom that was announced in Jesus' first words in this very gospel.

Mark 1, verse 15. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news. So as Jesus comes, clearly kingly, on a donkey, with the acclamation and homage of a large crowd, it is clear that the die is cast.

The king has come to confront Pilate, Roman rule, Jewish elders, Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees and Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.

Psalms 118, from which this quote of the people derives, expresses the adulation of the people of God for the coming of the Messiah. Often when a quote is used in the New Testament from the Old Testament, it's not just the words of the quote that matter, but the context from which they come.

For example, if I was to say to you, the Lord is my shepherd, probably the connection you make in your mind is, well, therefore we lack nothing, he leads us beside still waters, etc.

[20 : 47] That is, the first few words of the psalm imply the rest of the psalm. And so it is in the New Testament very often. A quote from a bit of the Old Testament implies the wider context from where those words come.

In Psalm 118, the acclamation of the coming Messiah is tied to a greeting and welcome and acclamation in the temple itself. So in that Psalm 118, in the part of the passage that was read for us, after the words that say, save us, we beseech you, O Lord, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, it goes on to say, we bless you from the house of the Lord, that is, from the temple.

At the end of this passage in Mark, Jesus comes to the temple. He entered Jerusalem, went into the temple, and when he looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Where is the acclamation and welcome from the house of the Lord? There is silence. Jesus looks around, there is no welcome, there is no acclamation from the priests or the leadership in the temple.

It is almost anticlimactic. After all the hubbub and shouting and singing and praise that has been accompanying Jesus down the Mount of Olives, it is as though as he walks through the gate into the temple courts and precincts, all that noise dies away.

[22 : 27] And verse 11 is eerily silent in a sense, as Jesus looks, surveys the temple, and then departs back to Bethany for the night.

It is a condemning silence when we understand the expectation from the psalm that the crowd quote. You see, we expect a dramatic action. We expect either the acclamation and welcome of the priests, here is the king come, hallelujah, none of that.

Or we might expect a dramatic action of opposition because as we've read Mark's gospel, we know the Jewish leaders are wanting to put Jesus to death. There's none of that even. Just silence.

We're not told what Jesus sees, we're not told what he thinks, but in the next few chapters that cover the days following before his death, it's clear what he thinks, in the confrontations that get stronger and higher day by day in these final days of his life on earth.

But Psalm 118 also expects that because part of its wider context is also that famous verse, the stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

[23 : 37] that is the very psalm quoted in praise of Jesus has within it that note of rejection. The silence of verse 11 is like the calm before the storm that begins to erupt the next day and culminates in the cross on the Friday following.

This passage is about Jesus the king. It's a kingship claim that is not lost in the rest of the chapters of the gospel. Jesus says as much to the Jewish council at his trial that he is the king.

And when he's nailed to a cross an inscription is put above him that details his crime, king of the Jews. And what was intended then as mockery is in fact ironically the truth.

He is the king, even in death. for we keep seeing Jesus overturning worldly values and perspectives. We see it in this passage as we've seen it in recent ones as well.

For in the last few chapters we've seen things like the first shall be last. If you want to be first you've got to be the servant or slave of all. If you want to keep your life you've got to lose it for the sake of Jesus.

[24 : 58] What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but ironically to forfeit his soul. Jesus keeps overturning the values of the world and here he does the same. He arrives in Jerusalem as the king, God's great king but on a donkey, humbly and lowly and he doesn't come with a sword or a warrior horse or wearing armour.

He doesn't come to fight and overthrow the Roman empire at all but as we know he comes to defeat a greater enemy, sin the devil and evil.

Here is the long awaited, totally in control, Messiah king, the servant king. I think sometimes for Christians it's easier to approach Jesus as the servant because so often we're all too ready to ask him for something.

Jesus can you do this for me in our prayers? God I'd like this done, I'd like this to happen tomorrow. Please help me in this way. And so we treat Jesus as our servant.

Far harder is it for us to keep regarding him as our king, as our sovereign, the one to whom we are to submit, the one whom we are to follow where he calls us, the one who commands us, the one who commands us and sets his rules by which we are to live, which so frequently we want to shake off.

[26 : 40] Yes, a servant king, not just our servant, but our king forever, the king who liberates us from sin and evil, who gave his life as a ransom for many, but the king whom we're to serve with our lives and follow him all our days.

Amen.