

**“Pausing to look around”, a sermon for Palm Sunday based on Mark 11:1-11 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 28 March 2021.**

We’ve been building up to this moment for weeks. And Mark has been pushing us along at a cracking pace. Immediately this ... immediately that. He’s been leading us towards Jerusalem. And he kept telling us what was to happen there. Three times Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. Mark has been preparing us for this day.

So now we are on the final journey. Classically Mark would take us from Jericho, along the road, then down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and up through the special gate into Jerusalem. But Mark diverts us off the road, not far off the road, to the small towns of Bethphage and Bethany. Why would Jesus and the disciples go to such a town? Well, in Bethany there was a familiar home. When you are walking long distances, when you are about to face an oppressive power, when you are facing death, a haven, a safe place is exactly what you need. To rest, to prepare, to consider. And so there was the home of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus, the one who got them into trouble by coming back to life. Now here was a home of service, of faith, of hope, and of deep love. Such faith and love, that according to the gospel of John, Mary washes the feet of Jesus with her hair, the smell of her perfume filling the home, the preparation of a body for the beating it was about to receive. A preparation for suffering in a home that knew hope. Now, it was probably Saturday night.

The following morning, probably Sunday morning, from that home, Jesus sends out two disciples to find a donkey. The two sent out were disciples. They would remember that previously Jesus had sent out to cast out demons, to proclaim the message, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick. They had been sent for a responsible and transformative reason. What a responsibility! What a calling! But this time, their task was to find a donkey. As mundane and ordinary and everyday task. A bit of a contrast. Tom Long wonders whether the two disciples were James and John. Why James and John? Because just a few verses earlier, they were the ones who asked Jesus – Let us sit at your right and left hand, in your glory. Ahh, glory. That’s what they meant for, they thought. A certain kind of glory. And Jesus said, whoever wants to be great needs to be the servant of all. Glory. Well, they got glory all right. Can you find me a donkey? The most menial of tasks, the most menial of animals. I wonder as they walked along looking for a donkey if they said with irony – do you remember

when we were called to fish for people. Now we are fishing for donkeys. It was the most menial yet most necessary of tasks, to enable the Son of God to enter the city for the healing of creation. How often do such simple tasks enable such noble outcomes! I remember a Master of Knox College with a Warden of Selwyn College on the Selwyn roof getting down the Knox bath that was up there. Both being ministers, he said – “We were ordained for this!” Donkey finders.

So they find the donkey and Jesus, and the disciples came down from Bethany into Jerusalem, all the way into the Temple court, the centre of city power, the centre of their faith.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this day. In 63BC the Roman legions put an end to an independent Hebrew state. From then on Israel laboured under the dictatorship of a cruel and pagan ruler. In AD 70, around the time of this gospel, that oppressive rule resulted in the catastrophic destruction of the Temple. After the loss of independence, after years of oppressive rule, the people of Israel longed for a messiah, a messiah who could establish God’s kingdom in Israel, to make happen what had been prophesied long ago. And their hopes were about to be fulfilled. After Jesus had ministered in Galilee for three years, now Israel was to be restored.

Mark wants us to know that this was no incidental event, no haphazard moment. Jesus was putting into effect the prophecy of Zechariah, for that is the passage quoted in Mark 11. He was provoking the authorities by acting out the prophecy of God’s anointed king – “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 ... His dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.” And in fulfilment of another prophecy regarding that restoration, the people spread their cloaks on the donkey and on the street. The longed-for king.

So here we are. Mark’s racy narrative has brought us to this point. The prophecies of Israel have brought us to this point. The actions of Jesus’s closest friends have brought us to this point. We are on the cusp of the restoration of just rule, about to fulfil Israel’s longed for freedom, the break-through. He rides the royal donkey, he goes through the gate, the cloaks are laid and then, and then, says Mark ...

“He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

He looked around at everything and went home. Is that the best you can do, Mark?

Imagine the scene. The donkey has been returned. The crowd has dispersed. And Jesus? Well, Jesus melts back into the Passover crowd, walks around the temple, maybe looks for food, decides it's late, and walks a couple of kilometres back to Bethany. An odd anticlimax.

John Calvin was so worried by this disappointment that he suggested Mark had made an editing mistake. Mark meant to put in the throwing out of the money changers but inserted it in the wrong place.

But what if it wasn't a mistake? Maybe walking around, looking around the temple, this important, valued place, prompts him to think about what his plan is for the next day. Perhaps he wants to sleep on it, to be sure it is what God is calling him to and not an extension of his own bravado fed by the adulation of the crowd. Or perhaps he is wondering about the emptiness of hosannas sung for a king who fits expectations. The reign of God Jesus has in mind is very different from what the crowd expected. Or perhaps, walking around the Temple, he noticed what was going on, and he knew that what was needed was cleansing from within rather than rule from without. Even in the most holy of places, he saw injustice and exclusion. So he walks back to Bethany, to the home of Martha and Mary, to the haven. Take some time, consider, wonder, prepare.

According to Mark, the following day, probably Monday, Jesus drives out the money changers from the Temple, saying “it is written that my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it into a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17).

That incident is the last straw for the religious authorities, finally provoking them to act. So it was that Jesus' survey of the scene, his “looking around at everything” was a provocative, prophetic and dangerous looking, it became the prelude to the cross and resurrection.

Looking around. When a rich man comes to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” Mark notes that Jesus, “*looking at him*, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.’ On the heels of that encounter, Jesus “*looked around* and said to his disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples asked, “Then who can be saved?” again Jesus “*looked at them* and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

Looking around. Pausing to see what is there. In a prophetic frame, looking around led Jesus to the most courageous, loving and sacrificial act of his life. For our sake.

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