

Approaching Jerusalem (Mark's story)

Study One



The Transfiguration, Pietro Perugino, c1500

Opening Chat...

If you were contemplating a pilgrimage, or even visiting a religious site you have not yet been to, where would the destination be and why?

Key verses...

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant. (Mark 9:9-10)

Hoping for the positive...

(Read Mark 9:2-32)

One issue we have when reading a Bible passage is understanding what it was like for the characters involved, and here is a case in point, as this journey of faith the disciples are taking with Jesus approaches a point of climax in Jerusalem. What was it like to accompany Jesus on a walk up a mountain and suddenly have a vision of Elijah and Moses conversing with him? What was it like when a crowd appears, expecting demons to be driven out from a young boy as Jesus did recently, but then gets agitated and argumentative when his disciples fail to do the same?

The problem is that we have the historical record in front of us, whereas they are in the thick of it and unclear what happens next. Faced with Moses and Elijah, Peter does not think much

further than here are three important people who need a tent to meet under. The vision that God gave was more likely one of Moses, the lawgiver, and a famous prophet presenting Jesus as the one to whom they had long pointed. To emphasise this, God takes Moses and Elijah away and leaves Jesus alone with the words, 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' - which echoes words from Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

Then Jesus talks of 'rising from the dead' and Elijah having come as a precursor to the Messiah (through John the Baptist) and the disciples' confusion deepens, and these clouds would hang over them and only clear after the resurrection.

Down from the mountain we glimpse some of Jesus' own frustrations,

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knowing his time on earth is short. Can you picture that moment as the crowd look for, at the very least, a magic trick from the disciples and are disappointed? Can you feel the raw emotion in Jesus' cry, 'O unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?'

Was Jesus directing his words to the crowd or the disciples? His response to the disciples' questions after the exorcism points to their lack of faith (see also Matthew 17:20).

There was a need for time out. Jesus needed to teach his disciples without the usual distractions of an expectant crowd.

So, walking through Galilee Jesus explains that someone will betray him into the hands of those who want to take his life. He will die, but after three days he will rise again to life. There is no discussion, as the disciples are possibly afraid to know any more!

Discussion...

- 1: Why might Jesus have selected only Peter, James, and John to accompany him up the mountain and experience the Transfiguration?
- 2: After coming down the mountain, is Jesus harsh to include the disciples in his rebuke to an 'unbelieving generation'?
- 3: The disciples could do nothing for the boy possessed by an evil spirit, even though the power to do so was given by Jesus and they had used it successfully (Mark 6:7,13). Jesus responds by telling them this kind can only come out by prayer (or fasting). Is this an inferred criticism that they were taking such power for granted, or something else?
- 4: Confusion and misunderstanding are throughout this passage. How easy is it to empathise with the disciples, or should they have put two and two together by now?

A little clarity...

(Read Mark 10:32-52)

It should not have been a surprise to anyone close to Jesus that the road they were travelling would lead both to death and resurrection because Jesus had hinted at what lay ahead, but experiencing this first-hand was not easy.

Here, Jesus is more explicit in telling them the Jewish leaders would be responsible for his death, but at the hand of the Gentiles who would mock him, spit on him, and flog him prior to execution.

The reaction of two of his disciples shows a complete misunderstanding of what is about to happen. James and John are looking forward to joining Jesus in a Messianic

kingdom they passionately believe is just over the horizon, hence their desire to sit either side of him in his glory. Jesus offers no such commitment, but continues his teaching, telling them that better than seeking power is a willingness to suffer for his sake. In fact, both these disciples would suffer for their faith; James killed by the sword and John exiled to Patmos.

You don't find true greatness, says Jesus, in the way Gentile rulers lord it over their people, or occupying seats at the top table, but in humble service – a great paradox of the kingdom of God that the disciples had yet to grasp.

And then, just fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem, there is a glimmer of hope as they walk through Jericho along a pilgrimage trail towards the Feast of Passover, and a blind beggar calls to Jesus as 'Son of David', a messianic title.

The crowds try to silence him, but Jesus hears his cries, calls to him and asks that all-important question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' the same one that he asked James and John.

They wanted power, and earlier a rich man had requested eternal life (verse 17), but Bartimaeus had only one request, 'Rabbi, I want to see!'

The Jews understood there to be a connection between salvation and physical wholeness, and in this miracle, we see both healing and salvation as Bartimaeus follows Jesus along the road to Jerusalem.

Discussion...

- 5: The only one sure of what will happen over the next few days is Jesus and yet his work, particularly with the disciples, is not over. How easy do you find it to put bad news to the back of your mind and carry on as normal, and are there coping mechanisms?
- 6: James and John, on their own or accompanied by their mother (Matthew 20:20ff) have an awkward question to ask Jesus. This could be a proud Mum wanting the best for her sons, or their own ambitions, but what is so wrong about it?
- 7: How does Jesus' question to Bartimaeus feed into our thoughts about prayer?

A welcome and a challenge...

(Read Mark 11:1-33)

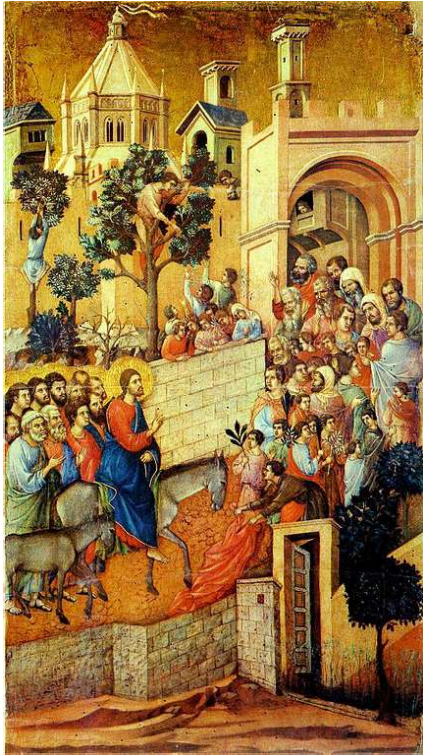
The nearer he gets to his destination the more open Jesus becomes in declaring his messiahship. There is less time for teaching, speaking in parables and trying to get his followers to understand who he is and what their response should be. So now there will be a very public entrance into Jerusalem, one which will fulfil a prophesy (Zechariah 9:9) of Jerusalem's king coming 'righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey'.

There was already a steady stream of people entering through the city gates for the Passover Feast, many of whom would have heard of Jesus, maybe even witnessed the miracle of Bartimaeus being given his sight, and were following him into the city wondering what might happen there. They

may still be expecting a different Messiah, a military king, but they welcome Jesus into the city in the traditional manner, with cloaks and branches spread on the ground before him. The song they sing is not only one of welcome, as 'Blessed is he who comes' is part of the Hallel sung at all Jewish religious festivals, particularly Passover, and in this context has real messianic implications, with Mark adding the line about the kingdom promised to David's Son (Psalm 118:26).

Mark adds something else that might be one of Peter's memories, that just as the day was drawing to a close Jesus made a thorough inspection of the temple courts and buildings, acting as someone who had the authority to do so, before overnighting in Bethany.

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Maesta Duccio, detail, Christ entering Jerusalem, 1308

On the walk back into Jerusalem there is the encounter with a fig tree (a familiar Old Testament picture of the Jewish nation), abundant with leaves (which suggested fruit) but barren and therefore cursed by a hungry Jesus for promising much and delivering nothing – a reference to the current spiritual state of the nation.

Then it is into the temple courts and for the second time Jesus (John 2:14-16) directs his anger to those who are showing irreverence for the temple and exploiting those coming to pray. We are told that the chief priests and teachers of the law were afraid to act because of the enthusiasm of the crowd, but later they corner Jesus in the temple courts and question him about authority. What gives him the right to say and do these things?

But Jesus wants them to work that out for themselves, and though they may well have already done that in their minds, they are not prepared to admit it in public. Fear, which will influence their next move, has silenced them.

Discussion...

- 8: Jesus seemed very keen to connect his life and mission with ancient prophesy. Why?
- 9: The fig tree promised much but did not deliver. It was a picture for its time, but is it relevant for the Church in any age?
- 10: The disciples struggled earlier with a healing, and in verse 24 of our reading, Jesus says of prayer, 'Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe you have received it, and it will be yours'. How easy is that in your experience?
- 11: The people welcoming Jesus sang familiar and well-loved words. What is your favourite hymn or song for Lent and Easter?

For prayer...

Remember at this time prayer all those who live in fear of persecution for their faith