

Before Their Very Eyes

Zechariah 9:9,10

John 12:1-19

Certain familiar episodes in the Bible do not fit well with our commemorations of them. The visit of the Magi to the little boy Jesus is the most notorious of these. Virtually nothing about the way we depict this story in our Christmas celebrations is accurate. For example, Matthew tells us the Magi visited a little boy in a house, not a newborn in a manger. Palm Sunday serves as another example of this disconnect. Oh, waving palm fronds and singing hosannas fit the biblical accounts. But our need for a joyful mood on this day misses its point. Lent is always such a downer. We've just made it through winter, spring is in the air. Even more this year, when we sense we have begun to emerge from our year-long lockdowns, do we want to celebrate Palm Sunday as a triumphant moment in Jesus' life. But the truth is he was riding to his death and he knew it.

Others knew, too. Lazarus' sister Mary did. Her understanding of what Jesus had been trying to tell his disciples led her to make the rather odd decision to anoint his feet with a "costly ointment of pure nard". Commentators have long pointed out she was symbolically preparing him for burial. Writing some 140 years ago the great B.F. Westcott tells us that "instead of the customary anointment on the head, Mary chose the feet of our Savior, placing herself at his service as she understood he was soon to do for all believers. And she used the very substance all but the poorest of

families would use to anoint a loved one who had died.”

Jesus entered Jerusalem to die. When we see this so much else in the Gospels comes into focus. Why did Jesus constantly pick fights with the Pharisees? He came to die. Why, following the Last Supper, did Jesus pray in the Garden of Gethsemane rather than high-tailing it out of town? He came to die. Why did Jesus apply Isaiah's prophecies about the Suffering Servant to himself? He came to die. He came to die that he might satisfy God's harsh yet perfect justice. He paid the price for human sin demanded in the covenants of old. And he did it for the likes of us.

On Palm Sunday we recall that the prophet Zechariah had seen a vision of God's anointed king entering Jerusalem in triumph. Except he had not. Zechariah 9 belongs to the half of that book biblical scholars have long known did not come from Zechariah's actual life. In fact, the blatantly obvious differences between the book's first and second halves were the very first subject of the Biblical criticism movement that arose in the late 19th century in Germany. With little trouble these scholars proved that Zechariah 1-8 relate events and prophecies stemming from the prophet's own life between c. 525-500 B.C.E. Zechariah 9-14 relate events and prophecies stemming from c. 325, 200 years later, after Alexander the Great had swept through the region. In these latter days tiny Israel once again fell under the domination of foreign powers. Once again, her hopes became pinned to divine intervention. Once again the old prophecies of a Messiah come to lead the children of God to freedom and glory became precious in the sight of the people.

And again, on the surface, Palm Sunday started out looking like the fulfillment of such a materialistic, nationalistic interpretation of Zechariah 9. Maybe this Jesus guy really is the Messiah! Maybe he will finally unveil the full magnitude of his supernatural power! Maybe the brutal Romans and the corrupt Jewish leaders will finally get what's coming to them! But in the Gospel of John's account of the whole day, after Jesus made a couple of typically cryptic comments, and after the sound of what some listeners perceived to be the voice of God, while others heard thunder, Palm Sunday ended when Jesus "departed and hid himself from them." The day ended not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Because Jesus entered Jerusalem to die. Before turning to the application of this claim we must make, let us dig more deeply into the events of John 12:1-19. Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary "perform their characteristic roles" (Westcott again). Martha serves Jesus and his entourage supper; Mary anoints his feet with nard ointment. And did you catch the detail that she "wiped his feet with her hair"? That is, she took the most precious and treasured part of a woman's anatomy to a first-century Jew, her hair, and used it to wipe off the most disgusting part of a man's anatomy to a first-century Jew, his feet. The level of her debasement, her servitude, her devotion to him is striking.

A second detail deserves notice. John tells us "the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment". Odors can transport us into the past and dig up long-buried feelings. In his For Whom the Bell Tolls, Ernest Hemingway described a band

of guerrilla fighters encamped in a pine grove. For his protagonist Robert Jordan, Hemingway writes, “the pine scent carried him instantly to the well on his parents’ farm. It lay in a grove of red pines. He had not set foot there in nearly twenty years, yet he felt the bittersweet tang of a time when his mother still lived.” Every person there in Lazarus’ house would have associated the fragrance of nard with death. Jesus came to die.

Judas could not get past the cost of that ointment. Pretending that he would have preferred that the substantial sum it cost be given to the poor, he protested. John tells us the truth: Judas stole from the disciples’ common purse. He wanted to siphon off his customary percentage. Jesus rebuked him with the often misunderstood comment, “Let her alone...the poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me.” He did not mean that his followers must stop caring for the poor. Across the sweep of his ministry he repeatedly made it clear he wanted them to do quite the opposite. No, with his rebuke of Judas, Jesus placed the focus squarely where it needed to be in this moment: on his imminent death.

Next John tells us the chief priests could not stomach Jesus’ popularity. When word spread that he had come to Bethany, a “great crowd of the Jews” came too. They came to see Jesus, but also Lazarus. Jesus had raised him from the dead some weeks earlier, making him a local celebrity. But to the religious establishment this was unacceptable. For “many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.” These crowds were “going away”, no longer attending to worship and sacrifice

conducted by those priests. Instead, they flocked to hear Jesus' preaching and hoped to witness yet another of the miracles they heard he had performed. We note in passing that the religious establishment nearly always reacts to new spiritual forces in precisely this way. Let we Presbyterians, who come as near to belonging to today's religious establishment as is possible, take care that we do not unwittingly oppose spiritual movements simply because they are new.

The next day Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt of an ass, the only beast of burden that absolutely refuses to go *toward* the din of battle. Horses will snort and strain to race into battle. Camels, too; the same for llamas. Even oxen will resolutely walk into the chaos. Not asses. My grandfather had a donkey. He also had a 2x6 board he kept tied in the donkey's harness. He called it "The Persuader". To us the ass has become a symbol of stubbornness; to the Jews of Jesus' day it stood for peace, for the avoidance of battle. The ludicrous vision of the rabbi from the bush leagues entering the capital riding a juvenile ass might have attracted scorn. It would certainly also, however, have immediately caused almost every person there to reflect on the old prophecies concerning the Prince of Peace.

Characteristically, John tells us the disciples did not understand the full meaning of Jesus' Palm Sunday actions until after his ascension. Yet the masses did comprehend that Jesus was engaged in making the prophecies of old come true right before their very eyes. The Pharisees wrap up our episode with a comment that proves this: "See that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him." They

have lost the room. They have lost face. They have lost their influence, with the Romans and with the people. At least for four more days. But then they would join in the conspiracy to accomplish the very thing Jesus intended to happen. Working with their Roman masters, the Pharisees will plot Jesus' arrest, conduct a sham trial, and have him crucified. That, they thought, took care of that. Except it did not. Because Jesus came to die.

And so at last, with perhaps a better understanding of the the nuances of this episode, we come to how we must apply the insight that Jesus came to die for the likes of us. We must respond by following the very process of reconciliation of which we have spoken throughout Lent. We must confess our sins, repent of them, receive forgiveness, be reconciled to God and one another, and go out in mission to serve him and his purposes. ***For this is precisely why he came to die.*** We call his death on the cross the atonement. Scholars engage in extended debates over the exact meaning of the atonement but for the life of me (and I mean the life of me literally) I cannot come up with a better definition than the Children's Moment version: Jesus died on the cross to make us at-one with him. Atone, at-one.

What thoughts must have passed through Jesus' head, what feelings in his heart, as he rode that ass to his own execution? Yet he finished the job. He got all the way to the cross that we might be reconciled to himself, to God, that we might be made at one with God and with one another. Praise God for that! Can you see it? He did it right before his followers' eyes and they did not understand. Do you?