

A Big Entrance

Psalm 19
John 2:13-22

Three hundred, thirty-one years before we have decided the birth of Christ happened, Alexander the Great visited Jerusalem. This Greek conqueror had led his armies on a war against the Persian Empire. They had rampaged throughout modern Turkey. Then they turned south, toward Egypt, the other great empire of the day. Along the way they besieged the city of Tyre, in modern Lebanon, and then attacked Gaza. The Jews watched with horror. They were a tiny nation, whose men had no hope of standing up to the Greeks. Furthermore, their rival Samaritans had sent emissaries to Alexander, claiming they were the rightful owners of Israel. The Jews sent emissaries of their own. Alexander received them, and explained the terms of his agreeing not to eliminate them: they must open the gates to the walls of Jerusalem, drop all their weapons, and line the highway from Gaza to Jerusalem. The Jews complied (what else could they do?) and even more. They all wore white (then as now the color of surrender) and their priests led them, wearing their finest vestments.

One thing we can say about Alexander: he was smart. He knew when he had cowed a people into submission and he preferred not to risk his own men in battle if possible. So he rode into Jerusalem on his charger. Foreshadowing Palm Sunday, the Jews laid their cloaks on the road before him. As he reached the opened gate, the

ancient historian Josephus tells us, a chorus of forty-four trumpets played a fanfare. First he twenty-two year old Alexander visited the site of the first temple on Mt. Zion. (The Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians decades earlier. The second temple, the one Jesus would visit, would start construction some 185 years after Alexander entered Jerusalem.)

After visiting the temple, carefully avoiding going farther into it than Jewish law prescribed for a Gentile, Alexander strode into the palace of the Jewish high priest. This highest-ranking Jew received him with the most sumptuous banquet he could muster. Following a brief stop in Jerusalem, Alexander the Great pressed south, where he imposed on Egypt a defeat from which it has not yet recovered. And he entered Cairo in much the same way he had entered Jerusalem. A second thing we can say about Alexander the Great: he understood the importance of making a big entrance. He knew how to use symbols and displays of power to guarantee the intimidation of peoples. Among other things, He also established the city of Alexandria, which eventually housed one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, its vast library. When that library burned in 48 BC, the world lost uncounted treasures of ancient literature for which no copies existed.

The Gospel of John tells us Jesus made his splashy entrance into the Temple courtyard at the very start of his earthly ministry. The other three Gospels tell us he drove out the money changers at the end, during Holy Week. More than one commentator suggests he did it twice, at the start and at the end. To this student this

seems a little too facile, too convenient. As we stated last week, Matthew, Mark and Luke follow one timeline for Jesus' life; John follows another. Maybe the author of John knew this "cleansing of the Temple" had actually happened early on, perhaps it happened twice. Or perhaps the author of John simply wanted to tell Jesus' story with a Big Entrance. Because it certainly is that.

We mentioned that Alexander the Great took care not to go into Temple precincts forbidden to the Gentiles. As John tells it, Jesus swung his whip cords and yelled at the money chambers in those same most public areas of the Temple grounds. He must have wanted everybody there that day to witness his actions. He aimed them at the men changing all the various coins in use then and there to the one coin accepted at the Temple. He did it because of their corruption. Imagine you go to Jerusalem, the one actual city in all of Israel, from your hamlet in a relatively backward province. These sharp-shooters see you coming from a mile away. You hand them Phoenician or Greek coins that are actually worth, say \$10.00. They know you do not know this, so they offer you, say, \$0.30. Even after you do the Semitic haggling, they come "up" to only \$0.45. They pay half of their profit to the Temple priests. And they cheat you this way *on the Temple grounds*. Jesus cannot accept this, as it happens *in the name of God, his Father*.

So Jesus makes his big entrance. He makes a statement. And that statement is this: I have come in the name of Yahweh. I am his son. I have the standing, the right, to make this statement. It is not that I don't care about your positions, it is

precisely that I accuse you of abusing your positions. In his lifetime the Jews had living memories of the abuse of power. The Babylonians. The Persians (though they turned out to be rather more enlightened and permissive). The Greeks. The Romans. Their own religious leaders. Now here comes a man claiming to be the Son of God. He declares his authority in the Temple courtyard. In the next chapter of John gives us the most-memorized verse in the Bible, 3:16. (“For God so loved the world...”) Jesus understood how to make a big entrance. Cause a ruckus at the Temple, then speak the deepest of truths to Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Do you suppose Nicodemus told any of his colleagues?

The more we examine the historical context of the New Testament the more clearly we must see the hand of God at work. We do not claim that the brutal Alexander the Great was doing the work of God. We claim, rather, that he played the part God had ordained for him. As did Nicodemus. And all for the same purpose: to confront John's readers with a central question the Gospels pose. Do you obey human powers or God? Do not answer too quickly. When human power parades up the highway to your home giving surface obedience to God is terribly tempting. Money. Influence. Popularity. These and other sirens sing their songs to us. Meanwhile, following Jesus inevitably leads to sacrifice. Yet he came to this earth—made his entrance—in order to place this choice before us.

Jesus made a big entrance in order to command the attention not only of his people, but of us. Hear his message. He wants our obedience, not our pretense. Follow him and him alone.