

Cheers, Cleansing and Cures Through the Eternal Rider

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-17

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Palm – Passion Sunday

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And so the day comes when Jesus enters Jerusalem, riding on a colt or a donkey. Matthew actually specifies two beasts. This day toward which his young life has pointed, this day beginning the ultimate confrontation between the forces of God and the forces of mammon. Jesus comes in victory, greeted by joyous Jewish pilgrims from throughout the Mediterranean region for Passover, the celebration of their liberation from Egypt, even as they dwell beneath the mighty unbending arm of Rome.

For three years now Jesus, who comes from Nazareth, 100 miles north, has been teaching and preaching, developing a reputation as a healer and one especially close to God. Now it all comes to culmination in Jerusalem. The time is fulfilled for Jesus to undertake his ultimate mission of love as he goes into the swirling caldron of state and religion forces who conspire against him. Throughout his mission he always walked. Today he rides.

Two disciples are dispatched to the nearby village of Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. It sits atop the Kidron Valley East of Jerusalem, a short half mile away through this tomb filled valley. Today standing atop the Mount of Olives and looking toward Jerusalem you can see ancient and modern tombs of the three distinct monotheistic religions that have vied, and still vie, for control of the City; the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians. You can see the Crusader Wall – built mostly over Herod's Wall and surrounding the city. You can see the sealed Golden Gate.

The disciples go to a pre-arranged place in the village and untie a donkey and a colt they are told will be there. If anyone asks what they are doing, Jesus tells them, simply to say, “ ‘The Lord needs them.’ And the man will send them immediately.”ⁱ It unfolds like clockwork, no questions asked. Then sits Jesus upon the animal, preparing to ride through. “Ride on King Jesus, No man can-a-hinder me. Ride on King Jesus, Ride on.” Matthew makes explicit Jesus coming into the City riding, not walking, that riding on a donkey, a beast of burden. Not a mighty horse of war but, in fulfillment of prophecy from Zechariah, riding as a King of Peace. “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”ⁱⁱ Zechariah continues his prophecy,

“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jerusalem, city of 40,000 has swelled to 250,000 for the Passover. The pilgrims camp in tents throughout the Kidron Valley. Little fires are lit for their breakfasts. They

come to sing and celebrate their liberation long ago, to make their Temple sacrifice, to eat their Passover Seder of deliverance as well as to mourn their present captivity. Down the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, he rides amid the pilgrims' camps, he rides.

I

His presence creates something of a sensation as his disciples first, then many among the crowd, instinctively take off their coats and spread them reverently before him as a carpet upon which to enter. They begin to cheer! "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" The word "Hosanna" is the Vulgate translation of the Hebrew and means, "save us we beseech thee." It was a word connected in Jewish texts and thinking with messianic hopes. "The man coming in the name of Yahweh is understood to be the Messiah."^{iv} The one promised by God to come and deliver and save.

Somehow it comes together for the crowd, at least on the surface, at least for today, that this healer and teacher who has been at work among them, is this promised Messiah. And they are filled with joy. Hence this happy simple festival of ordinary pilgrims greeting their savior king. This initial light, bright springtime feeling as Jesus rides into town. Yet within, Jesus must have already a heavy heart, in turmoil knowing where all this will go, and what all this will demand.

History tells how at the first major battle of the Civil War at Manassas, VA, 150 years ago this spring, not far from Washington, D.C. the social upper crust of the nation's capital dressed up and rode out in their buggies and carriages with picnic baskets for a day's outing. They expected to see a decisive quick victory. Instead that day almost a thousand were killed on both sides, and four thousand wounded, including many of the fashionable spectators. This Palm Sunday parade will lead to a costly battle, a decisive victory yes, but won not by a little parade. Many in this happy crowd today will by Friday be turned into an angry mob who will demand Jesus' crucifixion. As Luke tells the story, this is one of only two times in the Bible when Jesus weeps. "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"^v

II

Riding into the City, Jesus knows this is all part of God's great Divine plan. He knows this peoples' parade will not win the great battle he is now called to enter. Passing through the gates of the City his presence now evokes more of a mixed response. "The city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

Once in the City he goes directly to the Great Temple. He had been here before as a boy, where he engaged the scribes and teachers in debate. In Matthew this is the first recording of his entering City or Temple. And what he sees there breaks his heart. The central place of his faith has become a secular marketplace filled with buying and selling. It wasn't just that they were exchanging currencies from Italy and Libya and Greece, which the international pilgrims presented in order to get the Temple currency to make their offerings. That was standard practice. It was the whole lack of sacred awareness that filled the place. Religion had become just big business. Pay your money. Get your

forgiveness. Go your way. Enraged, Jesus exhibits anger we never see any other time as he **cleanses** the Temple grounds, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers. Peace and reverence indeed! This place has become a shambles of its former greatness and its intended dwelling of the Most High. He quotes Isaiah, “My house shall be a house of prayer, and adds, “but you are making it a den robbers.”

Jesus has come not simply to make an offering but to make THE OFFERING. Not a sheep or a goat but a Body. He has not come simply to clean up the place but to transform the place. “He is not improving the temple, he is demolishing the temple. He is vacating the old in order to clear out a space where the Messiah reigns and his Kingdom holds sway.”^{vi}

III

So much happens on this day so quickly that it all tends to wash over us without making a deep impression. So I want to zero in on one little detail that comes only in Matthew’s account, just after overturning the tables of the money changers. Only Matthew records, “The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he cured them, and the children sang their ‘hosannas’.”^{vii} Imagine this: even after such a chaotic uprising, even after his anger expressed at those who had forgotten the purpose of God’s Temple to be a house of prayer, even with his deep inner turmoil over what he was about to undertake, he is approached by these handicapped beggars, the blind and the lame, and he heals them, all the while, “the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna to the Son of David’” Coming into the City it was simply the Crowds. Now in the Temple it is the Children, who continue their song for salvation, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David.’

This is truly amazing. Even as he has denounced this corrupt place of worship for what it had become, he nevertheless brings healing and help to these who need it, struggling marginalized hurting people, the blind and the lame, and receives the hosannas of insignificant little children, those who in that culture were surely only to be seen and not heard.

Not allowed into the actual Temple Sanctuary, usually these sorts do not frequent the Temple – the preserve of those approved as righteous, devout, virtually clean. They only laid around the vast plaza and beneath the porches built by Herod the Great, seeking charity from worshippers as they came and went. It is these Jesus healed. It is for these Jesus has compassion.

The children were not counted in censuses and had no appreciable role in society. Yet Jesus, who as a child had spoken up and questioned the scribes and the priests, right here in this very Temple, now receives the children’s Hosannas. Jesus responds to his detractors, the chief priests and the scribes who saw the amazing healings and heard the confident singing of the children out of their own scriptures, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?”^{viii}

What Jesus offers in the Temple is not simple charity but is a sign of his new Kingdom of justice, righteousness and peace. You may remember, about a year ago Glenn Beck, late of Fox News, had on March 2 on his radio show called on Christians to leave their church if they heard the words “social justice.” He said, “I beg you, look for the words “social justice” or “economic justice” on your church’s website, and if you find them there, run away from your church... Social justice, economic justice are code words for socialism, communism, and Nazism,”^{ix} Glenn Beck said. As it turns out, Fox News has run away from Glenn Beck. They fired him because the advertisers refused to buy time on their network as long as he was spewing his hateful rhetoric.

Well Beck was wrong to identify Social Justice and Economic Justice with socialism, communism and Nazism. In fact those movements have not had much of a track record either in the promotion of justice, economics or Christian faith. But Beck did get it right that Jesus came to challenge the very causes of the world’s inhumanity one to another. He healed some lame and blind people there in the Temple court, which he had already announced was flawed for its lack of authentic prayer, and thereby demonstrated that even today in a flawed imperfect church, among flawed imperfect people like us, he is still at work with his healing. With his spirit at work in us, we can still make a difference and bring more social, economic and spiritual justice, righteousness and peace.

Today he is healing here, and going to attack the very root cause of injustice and inhumanity – our sin. For 2000 years, in spite of short comings of his church and his people, his Gospel has been challenging social structures, political, economic and religious arrangements that work to the disadvantage of poor people and the advantage of privileged powerful people.^x We see his influence rippling across the Middle East and Africa daily, as masses of people, long oppressed by tyrannical leaders, are rising up to claim their rightful places.

It is this full and complete work that Jesus is entering Jerusalem to undertake. He will bear our sins in his body upon the Cross and so bring us reconciliation.

He comes to create something utterly and totally new, even while living here amid the old and tired and corrupt; and that is to create the new person in Christ Jesus. On the Cross Jesus inaugurates a new order of human beings that neither the religious authorities nor the State Officials could contain. The heavy curtain in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom as Jesus died on Friday and God, once neatly held and managed there in a Temple box, burst out on all the world. Rome wanted only stability and submission. Rome did not care about the specifics of particular religions so long as the practitioners remained docile. But the aftermath of Jesus’ death on the Cross sent ripples across the Empire, and his followers would later spread his message round the world. Care for the sick and the poor, education for the children would accompany Jesus’ people wherever they went, and still do as our One Great Hour of Sharing reflects. Remember he said, “As you have done it to the very least of these, my brothers and sisters,” he said, “You have done it unto me.”

So Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem, receiving their cheers, offering his cleansing and his cures. Ride on King Jesus! He rides in on this day to undertake something loving and utterly selfless that will change everyone and everything touched by him.

Through the centuries these two thousand years he has been riding, his hosannas have been sung. The world continues in its evil course with its mixed motives. Yet beneath his cross there is a joining and a peace and an eternal consolation, a very real transformation. Jesus rode then and rides now, and nothing can stop him. And for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear, he offers this Kingdom, present and at work here and now, even as for all eternity.

During the year I served as student minister under Tom Cuthell at St. Cuthbert's Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, there sat each Sunday in the 4th pew back a distinguished gentleman in his 90's, close cropped white hair, moustache, tall, erect. This was none other than Lord George MacLeod of Fuinery, member of the House of Lords by gift of the Queen, Church of Scotland minister, and founder of the Iona Community. George MacLeod once said,

“I simply argue that the cross be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek... and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died, and that is what he died about. And that is where Christ's people ought to be and what church people ought to be about.”

Such Jesus has done. Such Jesus will do. Such we will recount, such we will remember this Holy Week. Cheer with him. Pray with him. Watch with him. Walk with him. Follow him, this healer, brother, victim, servant, sacrifice, king and friend. Jesus, who rides eternally into our city, into our lives, conquering and to conquer. Greet him, serve him, trust him, crown him as your “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”^{xi}

Amen, Amen.

ⁱ Mt. 21:3

ⁱⁱ Mt. 21:5

ⁱⁱⁱ Zechariah 9:10

^{iv} Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, “Hosanna”, p. 648

^v Lk. 19:41-42

^{vi} Paragraph 6 Tom Long, Matthew p. 237

^{vii} Mt. 21:14

^{viii} Mt. 21:16

^{ix} Glenn Beck, quoted by John Buchanan, in a sermon, 4-13-10 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, “On Trial, Who Is Your King”, p.2

^x Buchanan, *ibid*, p. 2

^{xi} Rev. 20:16