

# “Jesus’ Not So Triumphant Object Lesson”

Mark 11:1-11

4/16/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

When you think of what we call “Palm Sunday” and hear the familiar passages, about how Jesus rode into Jerusalem with people putting palm branches down in the road, of what do you think? I’ve always thought of a big parade with thousands of people. I’ve often thought that everyone, in that cast of thousands, was intentionally singing and shouting for Jesus – that everyone knew exactly what they were doing with the Messiah sitting up ahead on the donkey.

But how did those people know He was coming to town? How did they know the exact day of the parade? Did the disciples pass out circulars to announce it ahead of time? Did His followers put up posters in the pubs but the gospel writers forgot to tell us about it?

Perhaps the news traveled ahead by word-of-mouth and instead of people throwing confetti, or wearing T-shirts with Jesus’ picture on it, they decided to make palm branches the ‘in’ thing in the parade. Obviously that’s facetious.

The hardest question to answer is this: If all these people were supposedly choreographed into this gigantic parade scene, how come the parade fizzled out and nothing came of it? Verse 11 says that Jesus went into the city, went to the temple and looked around, and because it was late in the day, He went back out to the suburb from which He came. What really happened on that first “Palm Sunday?”

For months, Jesus was intentionally trying to stay out of the public eye – withdrawing beyond the Jordan river and quietly traveling around in Gentile areas. He did this because His popularity was hindering what He was trying to accomplish.

Jesus and His disciples of men and women (who traveled with Him) went into Jerusalem just about every time there was a feast. He had been in metro Jerusalem often enough to acquire good friends like the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the Bethany suburb. The fellow who loaned Him the donkey must also have been a friend. But one of the reasons Jesus was in the city again was because of the Feast of the Dedication (which was coming in 5 days).

But the history behind this Jewish holiday explains the crowds and the meaning of the passage for us. Here is what it was about.

Just 165 years before Jesus was born, a Syrian ruler named Antiochus presided over all of Palestine.<sup>1</sup> He was the ruler of the Hellenistic world (which means the Greek-speaking world) and the name he called himself means “The Manifestation of God.” While Antiochus was trying to force all of his subjects to adopt the Greek culture, he ruthlessly tried to eliminate the Jewish religion.

First, he erected a statue of Zeus in the sanctuary courtyard and polluted Yahweh’s altar by using it to sacrifice pigs. This desecration was called the “abomination” and was described in the Book of Daniel.<sup>2</sup> Devout Jews refusing to eat pigs’ meat were slaughtered. Those being killed for their refusal to turn from their piety were referred to as the Hasidim, meaning “the faithful.” The Pharisee sect was created from this group of brave and pious Jews.

Antiochus outlawed circumcision and conducted a campaign of terror to force Jews (and those of all faiths) into the general religion of the empire. The upper classes of Judaism did what he instructed. He next burned the Hebrew scriptures, executed women who had their sons circumcised<sup>3</sup> and he made keeping the Sabbath a crime.

Judas Maccabeus was the hero for the Jews and his story was told in the Apocryphal book going by his last name.<sup>4</sup> Judas, and his brothers, got the people to

<sup>1</sup> When Ptolemy took control of Egypt, he also quired Palestine, the Jewish homeland. From 300-200 BCE, the Jews inhabiting Judea (the area surrounding Jerusalem) enjoyed relative peace. Just before 200 BCE, Ptolemaic forces were driven out of Palestine and the Seleucid kings of Syria assumed control.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel 9:27; 12:11. Devout Jews refused to eat swine’s flesh because of Jewish law.

<sup>3</sup> Even making these women, before they were killed, wear the infants bodies tied around their necks before their deaths. Stephen Harris The New Testament, p.52 ISBN: 0-7674-0014-3

<sup>4</sup> Book 2 of Maccabees. This book paints horrific pictures of faithful Jews paying for their integrity with torture, mutilation, and death. When Eleazer, a ninety-year-old Torah instructor, spits out the pig’s flesh that Antiochus’s soldiers had forced on

stand up to Antiochus and through gorilla warfare, won back their temple. In 164 BCE, they recaptured the temple complex and rededicated it with their rituals. To this day, they commemorate the event with their Feast of Dedication – also known as Hanukkah. Make no mistake; the Jews didn't add on the Hanukkah holiday just to have something going on with gifts so they wouldn't feel left out when Gentiles exchanged gifts at Christmas. It was a huge national and religious holiday.

The winning of the Maccabean war represented a great time in the history of the Jews. It was one of the few times they won a battle against a larger government ruling over them. From 142 through 63 BCE, it was the only time (after the Babylonian exile and captivity) that the Jews actually ruled over their own land block until they forcefully took over Palestine in the 1960's.<sup>5</sup>

So the Jews, in Jesus' time, celebrated this event with the holiday called "The Feast of the Dedication." They would commemorate this holiday by having a national service in the Jerusalem temple and special services all week in the neighborhood synagogues. Pilgrims would travel into the towns and villages, bringing palm branches – waving them as they walked along.

During their worship, they would chant things from the Psalms – especially from Psalms 113-118.

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him, he is viciously bludgeoned to death. Even worse were the agonies endured by seven young brothers who similarly refused to pass the king's test of religious conformity by eating what the Torah forbade. One by one, before their mother's eyes, they were scalped, their heads flayed, their tongues cut out, their hands and feet lopped off, and then, still conscious, they were thrust into huge pans and slowly fried alive (2 Macc. 7).

<sup>5</sup> Following Judas' death, leadership of the Jewish nation passed from various Maccabean brothers who eventually succeeded in forcing the Syrians to grant Israel national independence in 142 BCE. Despite protests from many of the Hasidism, the Maccabees made themselves kings, establishing the Hasmonean dynasty (named after Maccabean ancestor, Hasmoneas). The Hasmonean period (142-40 BCE) is largely a record of intrigue, ambition and treachery – a series of tragically missed opportunities for achieving Jewish unity and peace. Eventually, rivalry among the Hasmonean rulers lead to a decision fatal to Jewish national autonomy: an invitation to involve Rome militarily in Jewish affairs. In 63 BCE, Rome made Palestine a province of the Empire. (Harris, p53f).

Recall that the Psalms were meant to be sung and the book we call "Psalms" was, in actuality, Israel's national hymn book. So they marched around in small parades, to and from the synagogues, with palm branches, chanting and singing these psalms.

If you were there, you would have heard things like: "Hosanna" (which is Hebrew for "may God save us" or "He Who Comes"). It was their way of singing about the coming Messiah figure. And the whole thing was a patriotic and religious commemoration of when Judas Maccabeus got the temple back for the people. It was also a time for expressing hope for the next Messiah who would come and save them.

We don't know exactly how much the people were thinking about Jesus as He was moving along in their midst. Jesus was riding in the middle of a crowd of these people, who were celebrating the feast, but it was likely that only a few of them knew Who He was. The disciples, at this point, probably thought Jesus was making His move and was going to gather a lot of followers in order to take over Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

As the people were sporadically celebrating the feast, Jesus got on a donkey and got in the middle of their parade. For a while, a few of them started making Jesus the center of attention. But when they got just inside Jerusalem's city line, the small parade fizzled out. People went to their synagogues or to the main temple, as did Jesus and then everyone went home or went down to the pub to have a few drinks.

The evangelist John, in his chapter 12, tells us that the disciples didn't even know what Jesus was doing but later, after the resurrection, they remembered this incident and interpreted it as fulfillment of prophecy. Why did Jesus do this?

Some Biblical interpreters believe that Jesus was just conducting an object lesson – a symbol that He was the Messiah, even though few people there actually grasped its meaning. It could be that the Zechariah 9 prophecy was being fulfilled in this parade as the participants celebrated a past Messiah

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<sup>6</sup> It was a popular Jewish anticipation that the Messiah would someday show up on the Mount of Olives, just outside of town, and many prophets predicted it. Zechariah talked about someone coming on a donkey, as our first Scripture reading said this morning. But a leader riding into town on a donkey was not a military sign but a sign of a peaceful leader.

and Jesus was just inserting Himself into that picture. It could be that Jesus was often concerned that prophecy be fulfilled.

It might have been just one more reminder, to His followers, that He actually was the Messiah. But Jesus apparently didn't have anything other than an object lesson in mind because when He got into town, He didn't start a pep rally – gathering hundreds of people. He didn't rent an auditorium and appoint a new Sanhedrin to take over. In short, He didn't do any of the things that one would expect of a person who was ushering in a nationwide regime.

But Jesus was a prophet – besides the Savior of the people. In times past, prophets often had to resort to object lessons and drama to impress the people with the point of their message. Recall from your Bible reading that one fellow, named Amos, stopped talking, one day and started chewing up and swallowing the scriptural parchment he had just read. That got his listener's attention.

Another prophet called his audience “whore mongers who are chasing after other religions like sexually crazed men.<sup>7</sup> I bet he was out of a job soon.

Isaiah, with a group of listeners, walked up to an old abandoned shack in a field and said: “You know, Israel is in about the same shape as this old shed. It's because God has abandoned it – just as this shed has been left here to fall over and rot.”

So what we have usually called “The Triumphant Entry of Jesus” was merely a time, close to the end of His life, when He acted out an object lesson – putting Himself in the midst of a celebrative parade of people (who were remembering a past Messiah and who perhaps looked forward to a future one). And Jesus' ride, that day, was a ride into Jerusalem and a not-so-triumphant end of His life by torture on a cross. Jesus came to earth not to triumphantly rule over everyone but to serve – to lay down His life for anyone who would believe in Him.

But most of us today like triumphant things. We all want to be winners, to have power, to have security and comfort and to be number one. This happens not only in our country but in the Christian church.

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<sup>7</sup> who lustily work their way to prostitutes' apartments.'

Curiously, our nation's desire to be triumphant showed up in our country a few decades ago with the arm's race. Back then, America and the Soviet Union could destroy the world twelve times over with the fire power they had stored away in their nuclear arsenals. Today, over 40 nations have nuclear weapons. In the United Nations, there has already been over 6,000 meetings to try to disarm the world and yet not one weapon has been destroyed.

Back in the 80's our leaders told us that our national security rests on what is called “mutually assured destruction” and I think it is ironic that the initials to that ideology are MAD. “Triumphantly” our country put 46% of all tax dollars into military spending and sadly only 28% went toward human resources. Imagine the cancer cures, the lower health care costs, the care for the elderly and our new transportation systems if those percentages had been reversed.

While it was repeatedly substantiated that money put into peace-time projects would have created more jobs than equal amounts put into military projects, our nation's top priority remained the maintenance of our level of overkill – and making a few people rich with the cost overruns and illegal marketing of stored unused military hardware. Instead of the people who really need it getting help, like the farmers, the children, the physically disabled and those needing housing and medical services, we poured billions into our macho image. We did this until the Soviet Union disintegrated. We fearfully competed in the arms race until we saw that in the end, it had strangled the economic, social and spiritual life out of Soviet Union.

Sometimes parts of the Christian church have been no better. What would you do, as a church, if you had 15 million dollars to spend on God's work?

Well, you could expand this property into a community center which practically helps the people of this neighborhood catch up with their healthcare, their education and receive the counseling and family help more easily within the reach of those with the E. Amherst lifestyle. And after you did that, you could take what is left over to support 10 orphanages in Nairobi for five years and keep 1,000 children alive. With this kind of money, you could use it to help poor

American families be trained for work and be healthy – educating them to take care of themselves.

We could do all that, or, we could plop that 15 million into one big glass church building, just like Rev. Schular (and his Crystal Cathedral) has done in California. And even on smaller levels, churches can easily forget what they have in common and end up in competition and alienation. Churches that are located near each other rarely think about pooling their resources, advertising their Christian Education courses, doing pulpit exchanges and sharing talents. Why?

I think it is because of a myth that uses the same convoluted logic that seemed to possess the mentality of our country back in the times of the so-called cold war of the nuclear arm's race. The myth on the international level is, that if you arm yourself to the teeth and continually have the ability to destroy the other person, they are going to be your friend out of fear.

The myth that prevents cooperation between sibling community churches is this: that if you get friendly with other churches and cooperate and do things together, you're going to lose members and your church will empty out. Competition means your priority is to become the biggest, the most prestigious and the most powerful.

It has been relatively easy to lose sight of the fact that one person, two thousand years ago, rode into town, one day – into a town which, in a few days, brutally murdered Him. He had little money and not more than a hand-full of followers – all of whom deserted Him. And with no sense of triumph, He suffered the ugliest death imaginable.

But this One Being conquered death and brought life to millions of people, to you and to me. It was a new way of doing things, a new wine that just won't fit into the old worn out wine skins of the world. And what was distinctively different about this One person was the need not to triumph over people but to serve them instead. He laid down His life for them – for you and for me.

This is our purpose today. This is why your cardiovascular system is functioning for these few years on this planet. This is why God made your muscles in your bodies and the brain cells in your

head, and the richness of your personality – for service.

So where is the parade of your life going? Are you out to win or are you here to serve?

