

Walking with Jesus

on the road to the cross

Lent
2021

Ven Lionel Whatley

Week 7

PALM SUNDAY

Scripture

Matthew 21:1-11

Triumph or a tragedy?

I love Palm Sunday, with memories of marching down the street to church waving palms and singing songs!

It was easy to imagine the enthusiasm of the crowds that welcomed Jesus as he arrived in Jerusalem! They were shouting 'Hosanna' which I always thought meant 'Praise him' but is better interpreted as a cry of impatience, 'Save us now!' For those crowds in Jerusalem who were fed up with waiting for deliverance from the Roman oppressors, it was a cry of excitement that this finally might be the king for David's throne who would mount a military coup against the Romans. In Galilee, some of Jesus' disciples had tried to make him king but he had refused, so maybe they thought he might finally be ready to lead an uprising and proclaim himself king!

Did they notice that Jesus was riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, as prophesied by the prophet Zechariah.

(Zechariah. 9:9)? Have you ever ridden one? If you have, you'll know it's definitely not the kind of animal to ride if you're going to war! As Jesus entered through the Messiah's Gate, or Golden Gate, which is sealed today but was wide open then, I wonder if some of them were sorely disappointed when instead of turning right to the Roman Garrison, he turned left towards the Temple? But Zechariah's prophetic words urged them to shout for joy nevertheless! Jerusalem means 'Shalom' or 'Peace'. The Prince of Peace was riding into his city. He would make peace through the blood of the cross.

Prayer

True and humble King, hailed by the crowds as Messiah: grant us the faith to know you and love you, so that we may be found beside you on the way of the cross which is the path of glory. (Collect for Palm Sunday)

How to make your own Palm Cross

<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Palm-Frond-Cross>

HOLY WEEK

MONDAY

29th March 2021

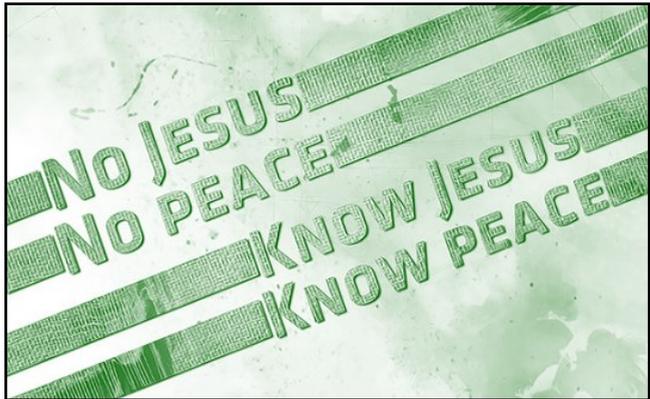
Jesus weeps

How did Jesus react to the shouts of the crowds? When some Pharisees told him to quieten them, Jesus said that if they didn't cry out, the very stones would. Even if their motives and understanding were skewed, this moment needed to be celebrated with triumphant shouts! (Luke 19:39-40). The creation, even inanimate rocks, recognised the importance of his arrival in Jerusalem!

And then, going down the Mount of Olives into the city, overcome by the emotion of it all, and the knowledge of what was to come, Jesus "wept over it." (Luke 19:41-44). He knew that some of those who had cried "Hosanna" would soon be crying "Crucify him". He had the Father's agenda to follow, not the crowd's, and they would turn against him. He could also see where this nationalism would get

them and that the Romans would finally destroy the city a few decades later.

So what has all of this got to do with us? Well, the crowd was made up of ordinary people like you and me, and we are all affected by the spirit of our age, which is not that different to then.



Nationalism, protests, war. This is the world we live in. May we hear Jesus' words to Jerusalem (then and now), "If you had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes" (v42). If we are going to be peacemakers we will have to let Jesus into our lives, as individuals and as nations.

MONDAY (contd)

Scripture

Matthew 21:12-22

Cleansing of the Temple

Jesus headed towards the magnificent Temple but what he saw there horrified him. What was supposed to be a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:6-7) had become “a den of thieves” (Jeremiah 7:11).

They were charging excessive rates of exchange and high prices for animals used for sacrifices, making money out of those who had come to worship.



Notice what Jesus does after overturning the tables of the money-changers – he does what the Temple was intended for— “The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.” And as the children excitedly cried out praises, he reminded the pharisees that this was what God loved to hear.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to prioritise the things you did in a place of worship— prayer and praise, justice, healing, and passing on our faith to the next generation.



Scripture

Matthew 21:18-22

Cursing of the fig tree

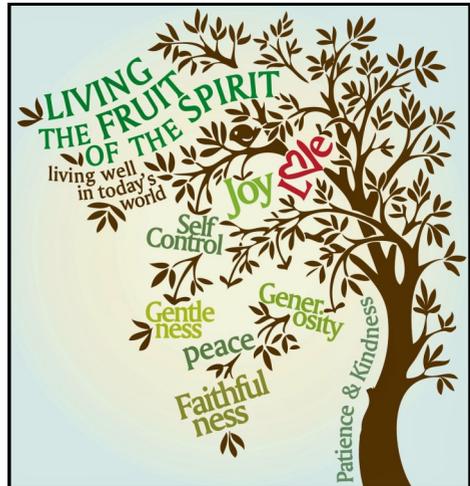
As Jesus and his disciples walked back to Jerusalem the next day after spending the night in Bethany, “being hungry, he saw a fig tree but found out that it had no fruit but only leaves. He cursed it saying: ‘May you never bear fruit again’.”

Cursing a fig tree (which Mark tells us was not supposed to produce figs as it was not the right season) seems somewhat unreasonable? But this is surely a parable of what is going on in Jerusalem at the time. The Temple was a wonderful, magnificent building but, like the fig tree, there were only leaves, no fruit.

Jesus was, like the prophets before him, enacting a parable. (Remember when Isaiah stripped naked and walked through Jerusalem; or when Jeremiah put an ox yoke round his neck!) Jesus was giving his disciples this kind of acted-out message and they would never forget it.

I wonder what Jesus sees when he looks inside our churches

and our lives? God is looking for fruit (the fruit of the Spirit) that will bring glory to his name. Will he find just a nice building, with lots of activity, or will he find a people who seek him, trust him and are living in the power of his Spirit? In reply to the disciples’ amazement at his cursing the fig tree, Jesus tells them not to doubt but to have faith and they will not only see unproductive fig trees wither, but mountains thrown into the sea.



Prayer

Lord, please live in us by your Spirit, so that our lives may produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Scripture

Matthew 24 & 25

The end of all things

Jesus has spent the day teaching in the Temple area and the disciples are marvelling at the magnificence of it. But Jesus shocks them by telling them that “not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.” What! Never! Yes, but there is more bad news. The world is also going to come to an end. As they sit chatting on the Mount of Olives, looking out over the city, Jesus answers their question about when this is going to happen.

Destruction of the Temple

This he said would happen soon. We know that the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD70.

The end of the World

He told them that only the Father in Heaven knows when this will happen. He tells them to look out for signs and events which will come before either of these events and warns them of trouble and persecution but also leaves them with a word of encouragement: “But he who



endures to the end shall be saved.”

Like in many of the prophetic writings, the distance in time between events is blurred, as when one looks out from a vantage point across the landscape—the further away they are, the more blurred the distance between the mountain peaks becomes.

There’s so much more to unpack in this passage but I’m hoping to follow up with a teaching series on Matthew’s Gospel from a Jewish perspective soon, so look out for that.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, there’s a lot we don’t understand, but we are happy that you, who knows all things, hold our lives in your hands, and we can trust you. Help us to “endure to the end”.

Scripture

Matthew 26:17-30

The Last Supper

AGAPE MEAL

Prepare a table with a cloth, a candle, a glass of red wine and some bread or matzos.

Jesus has planned this final Passover meal with his disciples, knowing what awaits him very shortly. Picture the cushions, the table, the basin, the bowl ... but no servant to wash their feet. So Jesus, the Servant King, takes the bowl and towel and washes their feet (John 13:1-12). If you've ever done that, you'll know how moving it is.

In the middle of the meal, Jesus says: "One of you will betray me!" Judas finally asks, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" and Jesus answers, "You have said so". Judas has made his choice.

Knowing that in the next 24 hours they would all abandon him, Jesus "took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat, this is my body'."

Eat the bread

At that point, they must have realised that this was no ordinary Passover celebration, this was different.

"Then he took the cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples saying: 'Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the New Covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness on sins'."

Drink the wine

They probably had no idea what he meant at the time but would later understand. The Old Covenant was sealed with the blood of a lamb, but the New Covenant with the blood of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". Hallelujah, what a Saviour.

Prayer

God our Father, your Son Jesus Christ was obedient to the end and drank the cup prepared for him: may we who share his table watch with him through the night of suffering and be faithful. (Collect for Maundy Thursday)

Scripture

Matthew 26:36-end; 27

Trial, arrest & crucifixion

The traditional 3-hour Good Friday service lasts from 12^{noon} until 3^{pm}. Let's spend time meditating on the events of Good Friday with time for silence in between.

1 The garden arrest (Matthew 26:36-56)

Jesus prays in a place called Gethsemane—an intense moment of anguish and struggle. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” Three times Jesus prays, “My Father, if it is possible, may this

cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus finishes praying and submits to his betrayal and arrest by Judas and the crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent by the Sanhedrin Council. He rebukes Peter who tries to defend him, and tells them that what is happening is in fulfilment of the Scriptures.

2 Jesus taken to Annas (John 18:12-14)

Jesus is taken to Annas, the former High Priest, for questioning. Jesus responds: “Why ask me? Ask those who heard me.” He has spoken openly and has nothing to hide.



GOOD FRIDAY (contd)

3 Jesus before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:57-68)

This was the highest Jewish Court, presided over by the High Priest. They unsuccessfully try to find false evidence to put him to death, but eventually accuse him of a more serious charge, trying to destroy the temple. Jesus remains silent. Then Caiaphas asked him a direct question, "I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" to which he replies, "Yes, it is as you say ... you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."



At this point Caiaphas tears his clothes. "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses?" to which the Council responds, "He is worthy of death."

4 Peter's denial (Matthew 26:69-75) and Judas' suicide (Matthew 27:1-10)



While this is going on, the disciples are in disarray. Peter, despite his earlier vow to be faithful to death (26:35) has denied Jesus by 3^{am} when the first watch ends, known as 'cock crow', which may be what Jesus was referring to (Matthew 26:75).

Meanwhile, Judas, seeing Jesus condemned to death and filled with remorse, has returned the thirty pieces of silver and hanged himself. The money was used to buy a burial ground for strangers,

fulfilling a prophecy of Jeremiah some six hundred years before.



GOOD FRIDAY (contd)

5 Trial becomes political

Pilate is dragged out of bed early and the trial is now shifting from a religious to a political one. (Matthew 27:11-26). The Sanhedrin don't have the authority to execute Jesus, so they change the accusation to a political crime. Pilate tries a number of things to evade what they are trying to get him to do but eventually asks Jesus a direct question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" to which Jesus gives a direct answer: "You say that I am."



6 Before Herod (Luke 23:6-12)

When Pilate is told Jesus is a Galilean, he sends him to Herod, king of Galilee, who was in Jerusalem at the time. He hopes that Herod will take responsibility,

thus releasing him from making a decision. Pilate is shrewd and knows that it was "out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him." Herod merely wants to satisfy his curiosity but Jesus remains silent, so they dress him in robes, ridicule and mock him, and send him back to Pilate.

7 Pilate gives in to crowd (Matthew 27:20-26)

Pilate, knowing Jesus is innocent, tries to release Jesus by offering the release of one prisoner for Passover as was the custom, but they are adamant that Jesus has to go, and choose the notorious Barabbas instead. "Crucify him, crucify him!" (Luke 23:20-21)

Eventually, rather than being man enough to stand up to them and the mob, Pilate washes his hands and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility". Then they release Barabbas, have Jesus flogged and hand him over to the soldiers for crucifixion.

GOOD FRIDAY (contd)

8 Jesus handed over to be crucified

(Matthew. 27:27-31)

The soldiers flog him with a leather whip with pieces of bone and metal balls at various intervals that 'reduced the naked body to strips of raw flesh'. Jewish law limited the number of lashes to thirty-nine.



Weakened by the brutal whipping, Jesus has a scarlet robe put on him and a crown of thorns set on his head. They spit in his face, mocking him and saying, "Hail king of the Jews". He is made to carry his own cross (weighing about 135kg) and when he collapses, Simon from Cyrene is

co-opted to carry his cross to Golgotha, the place of the Skull, outside the wall of the city. "And there they crucified him."

9 Crucified between two criminals

(Mark 15:25-32)

Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning, (Mark 15:25 says the "third hour") between two thieves, and it took him six hours to die. They offered him wine mixed with gall which was a kind of anaesthetic, but he refused. He was stripped naked, his clothes were divided amongst the soldiers by casting lots, and passers-by hurled insults at him, and the Jewish leaders mocked him.



GOOD FRIDAY (contd)

10 The death of Jesus (Mark 15:33-41)

At midday, darkness came over the land for three hours, and at three o'clock in the afternoon Jesus called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and soon afterwards, uttering another cry, he bowed his head and died.

As he died, thousands of lambs were being slaughtered for Passover. Jesus is our Passover lamb!

11 Darkness

At midday, when the sun should have been at its brightest, it was as dark as midnight as Christ, who never sinned "was made the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ". (2 Corinthians 5:21)

12 The veil torn in two (Matthew 27:51-56)

The veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. No man could have done that. This was God saying, "It is finished". Notice the astonishing events that Matthew records.

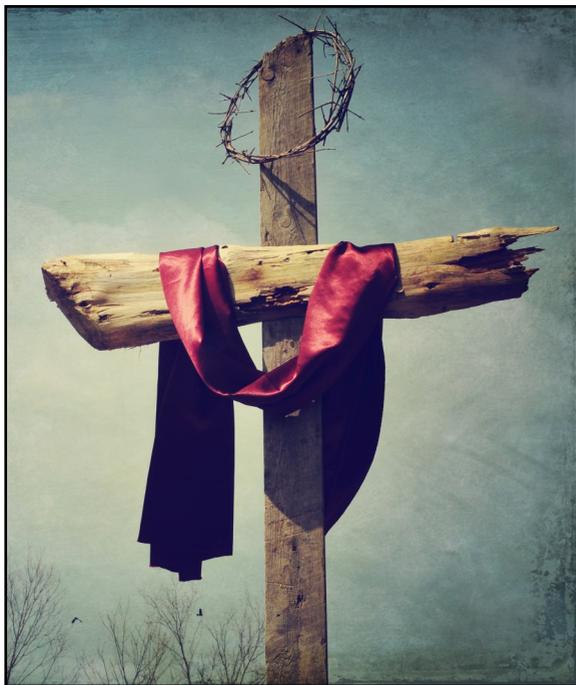
"And when Jesus had cried out

again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn (*schizo*) in two from top to bottom." (Read Hebrews 9 & 10 to understand how significant this was.)



"The earth shook, the rocks split (*schizo*) and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

GOOD FRIDAY (contd)



14 Women watch from a distance

(Matthew 27:55-56)

Matthew mentions some of them—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56) and John tells us she was the wife of Cleopas. (Emmaus Road (Luke 24). Some think that they were Jesus’ aunt and uncle. Mark mentions a woman called Salome, who was the sister of the virgin Mary, the mother of James and

13 Centurion’s recognition (Matthew 27:54)

“Surely he was the Son of God!” exclaims the Roman Centurion. When they all saw Jesus and the strange physical phenomena, they were terrified, and realised that the man they had crucified was not a criminal, but God. A tough, pagan Roman soldier was the first to realise who was hanging on that cross. “Surely this was the Son of God.”

John, who was married to Zebedee. Matthew mentions “the other Mary” (Matthew 27:61) and John also includes Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Prayer

Eternal God, in the cross of Jesus we see the cost of sin and the depth of your love: In humble hope and fear may we place at his feet all that we have and all that we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
(Collect for Good Friday.)

Scripture

Matthew 27:57-66

Burial of Jesus and guarding of the tomb

Jewish law forbade the body of an executed person to be left hanging all night. It had to be buried by sundown (Deuteronomy 21:22). But none of Jesus' relations owned a property or tomb in Jerusalem since they were from Galilee.

(Isaiah 53:9 tells us that Jesus will be killed alongside wicked men and buried in a rich man's tomb).

Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man and member of the Sanhedrin was a secret admirer of Jesus. Luke 23:51 tells us he "had not

consented to the deed" and now musters up the courage to ask Pilate for permission to give Jesus' body a proper burial. The actual burial is recorded with few words and was done in

accordance with Jewish custom.

The next day, although it was Passover Sabbath (v62) the chief priests breach the Sabbath law to ensure that Jesus is really dead and gone. Pilate agrees to seal the grave and place a guard so nobody could steal the body and claim that Jesus had risen. We know what they did not—that no guard, seal or huge stone would succeed in keeping Jesus in the tomb. Praise God.

Prayer

In the depth of our isolation we cry to you, Lord God: give light in our darkness and bring us out of the prison of our despair; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Collect for Easter Eve)



Scripture

Matthew 28:1-15

**He is not here, He is risen!
Hallelujah!**



We greet each other on Easter morning, 'Christ is risen!' and respond, 'He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!'

The resurrection of Jesus is at the very heart of the Gospel and because of it, we have good news to share. The slight discrepancies recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to my mind give a 'ring of truth' to the resurrection accounts. These were not a conspiracy theory but real people bearing witness to what they saw and heard, and their transformed lives were living proof that indeed, Jesus was not dead but alive!

Let's look at some of the witnesses Matthew focusses on:

1 God's witness

An earthquake and an angel at the tomb are two signs of God's heavenly power at work (Matthew 28:2). In Acts 3:24, Peter proclaims: "But God raised him from the dead because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

2 The women's witness

The women were first to know that Jesus had risen! After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb expecting to find a dead body. The tomb is open (not to let Jesus out but to prove that it was empty) and deserted - the earthquake, the angel and the stone being rolled away must have spooked the guards. The angel tells the women not to be afraid, shows them where the body had been and tells them: "Jesus, who was crucified, is not here for he has risen, as he said." (vs5-6) God gives them the task of telling the disciples the news, which is astonishing because women were not allowed to give witness in a court of law, but God chooses them as the first to know and the first to bear witness.

EASTER SUNDAY (contd)

3 The empty tomb

There was no disputing the empty tomb. Despite the stone and the guards, the tomb was empty on that first Easter Day.

Because there may have been rumours around that Jesus did not rise from the dead and that the disciples had stolen the body, Matthew addresses this head on. From that grave, two messages have gone out:

- One to the disciples, carried by the women to the effect that Jesus is alive.
- The other to the chief priests, carried by the soldiers, to the effect that the body has been stolen.

Nobody could deny that the body was gone and that the tomb was empty. There had been a guard and it had not prevented the resurrection. They had fled in terror and reported to the priests who bribed them to circulate the story that the disciples had stolen the body.

Resurrection appearances

Many of these are recorded in



the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 15. For forty days, until the Ascension, Jesus continued to show himself to his followers, proving that he was alive.



So let us rejoice that Jesus, the risen Lord, meets with us still, and sends us out to share the good news that he has triumphed over death, and is with us, even to “the end of the age”.

Prayer

God of glory, by the raising of your Son, you have broken the chains of death and hell: fill your Church with faith and hope for a new day has dawned and the way of life stands open in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

(Collect for Easter Sunday)

**Have a glorious Easter!
And enjoy your Easter eggs!**