

Opening the Kingdom

Palm Sunday – April 4, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

1 Corinthians 3:10-11

¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

This week, we conclude our series: Building the Kingdom. Jesus the Christ is the foundation on which we build God's kingdom. Today, we remember his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week.

Building well

Over the last six weeks, we have talked about our responsibilities and our opportunities in the building of God's kingdom. We've seen that from God's choosing of Abraham four millennia ago, God has sought the renewal and restoration of all creation through the work and commitment of his people. We too are those people.

Today's passage from 1 Corinthians is a continuation from last week. In the preceding verse, Paul compared the people of God to a building so that he could talk about our responsibility to build the church, and by extension God's kingdom, with integrity and discipline. In this, Paul compares himself to a master builder who is both wise and skilled, and who has laid a solid foundation grounded upon Jesus Christ.

Jerusalem at Passover

Ancient Jerusalem was a sprawling city with a population of 60,000 or so. But at festival time, the city's population would swell to nearly 200,000! And no festival was bigger or more well-attended than Passover.

In Jesus' day, Passover presented a real problem for the Roman occupiers. Not only was the city stuffed with throngs of Jews who resented the Romans as easily as they breathed, Passover itself was emotionally charged. After all, Passover celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, when God had saved the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. It certainly didn't take much imagination to lump the hated Romans in with Pharaoh. The typical Jew on the street anxiously awaited the day when God would free them from the Romans just as he had freed them from Egypt.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, would come to Jerusalem himself each year for the duration of Passover to oversee the peace-keeping. Pilate's headquarters were in the Antonia Fortress, overlooking the temple and its expansive courtyards. Roman guards would stand atop the fortress walls as they kept a nervous eye on the crowds below.

Paul then challenges the Christians in Corinth to build with care themselves. Specifically, Paul warns them against attempting to build God's church on any foundation other than Jesus Christ, indeed, Christ *crucified* (see 1 Cor 1:23, 2:2). For Paul, it is the proclamation of Christ crucified that under girds all we do, for it is both "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), which brings us right to Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

*Climbing to the kingdom*¹

Galilee is several days journey north of Jerusalem. Galilean pilgrims going to Jerusalem for festivals, such as Passover, preferred a route that brought them southward along the Jordan river valley to Jericho and then into Jerusalem. Though Jericho is only about twelve miles from Jerusalem, it lies 800 feet below sea level, while Jerusalem is 3000 feet above sea level. Jesus and the other pilgrims would have faced quite a climb as they made their way up to the city. Though the climb may have been physically fatiguing, it would have been spiritually exhilarating. As they climbed upward toward Jerusalem for Passover, they climbed toward the city of David and the great temple to remember the time of Israel's freedom.

Approaching the city at Passover would have been exciting for any Jew, but for Jesus' followers, it must have been electrifying; they were climbing toward the kingdom! They expected that Jesus

A Royal Reception

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Matthew's account of Palm Sunday is laden with these symbols.

Four hundred years before Jesus, the prophet of Zechariah told about God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt (Zech 9:9). Jesus used this imagery and entered Jerusalem on a colt.

We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but his followers certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They hailed him as the "Son of David." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They even waved palm branches, which were symbols of abundance and thanks. All this was a welcome fit for a king.

would be received into the city as royalty, as the returning king, as the Messiah. They expected that beginning in Jerusalem, all the world would see that Jesus of Nazareth was God's anointed king, the one who would end Caesar's kingdom and inaugurate the arrival of God's kingdom. But of course, it would work out very differently than they expected. Despite his royal reception into Jerusalem by some, the only throne waiting for Jesus was a Roman cross bearing a sign meant in ridicule: "King of the Jews."

Opening the kingdom

We at St. Andrew have been climbing upward for seventeen years. At times, it has been tempting to imagine that we've arrived, that we've finished climbing . . . and building. But that is not how it is with God's kingdom. In the weeks and months that followed Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his cosmos-changing resurrection, Jesus' disciples came to understand that their work had only begun. Though the old had gone and the new had come (2 Cor 5:17), though the end of the ages had met upon them (1 Cor 10:11), there was still much work to be done. Though Jesus' resurrection had signaled God's victory over sin and death and thrown the doors into God's kingdom wide open, there were still disciples to make, hungry people to feed, naked to clothe, lonely to embrace, unaware to teach, suffering to comfort . . . there was still much to do.

As we celebrate today the successful completion of another capital campaign, we look forward to continuing our climb upward, seeking to help others step through the open doors of God's kingdom.

¹This metaphor is from N.T. Wright's commentary, *Mark for Everyone*, which is available in *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore. The "for everyone" NT commentary series is being published as Bishop Wright finishes each volume. I highly recommend them. They are well-suited for a daily Bible reading program.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem . . . and the day after!)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Zechariah 9:9-17 The coming ruler of God's people</p>	<p>Day 2 Mark 11:1-10 Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 19:28-40 Luke's account</p>	<p>Day 4 John 12:12-19 John's account (the only one that mentions palms!)</p>
<p>Day 5 Mark 11:15-17 & Jeremiah 7:1-15 The day after Jesus enters Jerusalem, he goes to the temple and pronounces judgment on it, invoking the words and imagery of Jeremiah.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

April Book Recommendation

Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship, N.T. Wright

As you may have gathered by now, I strongly recommend the writings of Bishop N.T. Wright. No other present-day scholar or writer has been more helpful to me in my work at St. Andrew. Here is what William Willimon (he is dean of the Chapel at Duke University) recently had to say, "Tom Wright is just about the most insightful and incendiary conversation partner for today's preachers." But Wright's work is not only for preachers, it is a gift to us all. This book is a set of twelve sermons delivered by Bishop Wright while he was Dean of Lichfield Cathedral in England. He explores what it means to follow Jesus and helps us to see the challenge of discipleship. I'm confident that you will get a lot out of these meditations. His sermons "A World Reborn: Revelation" and "Hell" are worth the price alone.

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Gail O'Day writes that when we celebrate Palm Sunday, we are not simply commemorating a past event. Rather, the children's procession and all the rest is a *remembrance* through which Jesus' triumphal entry becomes real for us. What do you think she means? How is Palm Sunday real for you? We might be inclined to see it as a sort of victory parade . . . but that would be off the mark. We cannot remember Palm Sunday without remembering what follows; Jesus had not come to be enthroned but to be killed. To put it another way, how does Palm Sunday differ from Easter for you?
2. Many of us have seen *The Passion of the Christ*. Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. You might spend some time simply talking about whether seeing Mel Gibson's movie will change how you experience and understand the events of Holy Week. And if this year will be different for you than past years, how will it differ? Will there be a lasting difference?
3. Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem was an answer to prayer. The Jews had long prayed for release from their oppressors. They had long hoped that God would again send a true king for his people. God heard their prayers and answered them, but in a far deeper way than they could have imagined. They merely wanted victory over the Romans, but Jesus brought them victory over death itself. Could this be how it is with God's answers to our own prayers? Could we be looking for answers on the surface of our lives, while God is busy thoroughly reshaping us and our lives more deeply than we might have even wanted?!