

4-9-17 Palm Sunday Reflection on Mt. 21:1-11 "Two For the Road" by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

As you'd imagine we preacher-types face a bit of a challenge on days like today, and days like next Sunday. Somehow the expectation, real or imagined, is that we'll have something fresh to say. That we'll find a way around all that is known or presumed or familiar or even tired and worn about the most familiar of passages and come up with some new glimmer of something new. Easily this might strike you as an insurmountable task, a hopeless hope, even an exercise in vanity, as it does for us preacher-types. I mean, how dare we clergy presume to come up with something original to say...which really, rarely, rarely, hardly ever, ever happens. As my New Testament Professor drilled into our heads, "It's all been said before." So, clearly the preacher's task is not an envious one. And this is precisely where you should say a prayer for your pastor.

You know how sometimes things seem to come in threes? Usually things that one would rather wish hadn't intruded into the otherwise routine flow of life? Being in the people-business, I've observed this phenomenon time and again—whatever *it* is. And for the record I don't for a second believe that God is orchestrating these three-prong assaults on our tranquility and sanity. I don't for a second believe in a God that goes "gotcha, gotcha, gotcha...okay, that is three, time now to move on to the next helpless soul." No, that is not the God I know.

As I reflected once again on Jesus' triumphal entry I was struck by the number two. As in "two for the road," not that there is a mention of alcohol in today's lesson mind you; and no, I'm not suggesting for a second that Jesus was riding under the influence. You've heard the phrase "one for the road," yes, everything in moderation. But the origin of that expression has nothing to do with anything moderate. You may be interested in knowing that "one for the road" derives from the practice of offering condemned felons a final drink at pubs on the way to the place of public execution during the Middle Ages. And low and behold, for whatever it is worth, "on the way to public execution" does bear more than a passing resemblance to these last few days of Jesus' life. So, curious and interesting if nothing else.

Again, Matthew does make it very clear that Jesus did have two for the road. This is a narrative detail not found in the other Gospels BTW; and a detail that until this year I had not noticed. Had you? What Jesus had two of were donkeys. Yes, donkeys...but not in glasses. Very clearly, and it is not a translation issue, Matthew states Jesus sat on two animals, a mother donkey and her foal; as it is written, "he sat *on them*," plural. So, Jesus rode two donkeys into the Holy City; and apparently simultaneously—which in the

least, boggles the imagination, this idea that anyone, Jesus, anyone, could ride two animals at once. I don't know about you but the image of a bull-legged cowboy comes to mind, a *very* bull-legged cowboy. But then again, maybe Jesus was standing on their backs—one leg on one animal, the other leg on the other much like a circus performer. Either way, a pretty neat trick. It's no wonder that we remember the scene all these many years later.

Now, just as I thought this was a hugely original discovery on my part my ego was almost immediately deflated—after all, the Bible is the most examined text in the world. It turns out that scholars have from ancient times observed this quirky detail and have long debated its significance and meaning—yes, everything in the Bible has some kind of significance and meaning.

But first, a little background on why Jesus was there that day doing what he was doing. We recall his many predictions of confrontation and death, of his need to “set his face toward Jerusalem,” so we're not surprised that now he has finally arrived—we're uncomfortable with the notion perhaps, but not surprised. I think I for one would have preferred he hung out in the Galilee for like the next thirty years preaching and teaching and gathering in increasing numbers of disciples; which is my way of saying that my personal theology, unlike many people's theology, does not demand Jesus' death as a payment of ransom for my countless original sins since birth. But that is me. All the same the fact remains that “unique to our [Christian] faith [among world religions] is the fact that our Founder was executed by the established authorities” (Marcus Borg).

You may have some sense of how Jesus' being there, doing what he was doing, is understood as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The hope was of a day in which a great One would set things right, a mighty One, or Messiah, generally understood as a king in the manner of David, would ride into town and save the day. As we hear from Matthew, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”* For the people to call Jesus *“Son of David”* is to acknowledge him as their King—which we know misses the point somewhat, but they didn't know that at the time. So, yes, there is a deep sense of fulfillment of destiny here, of God acting in a decisive new way to shake the very foundations of the world, certainly the power base in Jerusalem—where sacred and secular power coexisted awash in corruption. In short, the ancient hope and prophesy is that God would provide a liberator from the powers of evil in the world, yes, a Savior.

Now, in no way coincidentally, the week Jesus selected to ride into town was also the very same week Passover was observed, Passover being of course a celebration of liberation from Pharaoh. Naturally, Rome was more than a little uneasy about the obvious association—a very popular religious celebration of freedom by people who were that very moment living under

brutal occupation. It was said that during Passover the population of Jerusalem may have swelled from 50 thousand to hundreds of thousands, obviously making Rome all the more uncomfortable. So, as you would imagine each year Rome sent in additional troops to “keep the peace,” a most violent euphemism. And as you would imagine, that army of peacekeepers also rode into the city. Where Jesus rode in from the East, the Roman Legions rode in from the West. And the rest of the week will tell the story of what happened when they met in the middle.

So yes, we can picture it, this study in contrasts. From the West, legions on horseback, Roman flags flying, the Roman Eagle prominently displayed, the clank of armor, the stomp of feet, the beating of drums all intended to signal that “resistance is futile!” And from the East, the side of town which prophecy foresaw Israel's liberator entering from, rides our Jesus...riding two, count them two donkeys. And yes, let there be no mistake, Jesus was indeed there offering the people liberation and freedom through his anti-imperial messages and teachings and his shocking way of associating with “*the little ones...the least of these*” all the while so obviously shunning and condemning the world's power-brokers.

Jesus' counter-cultural, counter-Temple theology is, of course, the very foundation our Christian faith rests upon. Moreover, the freedom we have received from sin and the freedom we have to approach God directly instead of through official channels is a direct result of Jesus long ago riding into Jerusalem in intentional defiance of the established order. Today we have open and free access to God—all you got to do is pray. You need not pay a Temple tax first; you need not make an animal sacrifice first; you need not be ritually clean, without blemish, first; you need not go through, in or around Caesar or his minions either. Today, no empire, no army stands in the way of your access to God! Today, no domination system controls God's forgiveness and your free relationship with God. Jesus' little parade—his earthly and eternal ministry—saw to that, accomplished that! Not bad. Not bad at all for a peasant with a fondness for donkeys and a revulsion to Imperial pomp and circumstance.

So, why two donkeys? Well, it is kinda cool actually. The most likely reason is poetic in nature. Matthew it seems is a bit of a romantic. In referring to both a donkey and a colt he is quoting from and combining two Old Testament prophecies, Isaiah 62 and Zechariah 9: “*Speak Daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King comes to you, meek, and mounted upon a donkey, AND upon a colt...'*” As it turns out expressing a single idea with two nouns—in this case a donkey *and* a colt—was common in Hebrew poetry. For example, a verse that you've likely heard many times: “*Your Word is a lamp to my feet AND a light to my path.*” Very simply Matthew was placing a gigantic exclamation point on Jesus' triumphal entry. With that in mind we immediately realize that Matthew was drilling home the point that the Jesus

parade was not just the fulfillment of prophecy, but a double one, a double fulfillment! Fulfillment times two! Fulfillment in a complete and total way! That's just in case any one of us had missed the significance of Jesus' parade. Cool huh?

So there you have it. Two for the road. A stunning fulfillment of prophecy which to this day continues to resonate in the hearts and minds and imaginations of the faithful. Blessed indeed is the One who came to us in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna in our midst! Praise be to God, give thanks and sing!

Amen