

Morningside
25/3/2018

Mark 11:1-11. Palm Sunday

We are gathered early in the morning in a small village in the Occupied West Bank, a couple of miles from Jerusalem. We're going for a walk together; but we take time to look around. There's not much to see. This is Al-Eizariya and you are thinking that it's a pretty ordinary place, until I tell you that this is Bethany. And the stories come flooding back to you. It was here that Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, lived, probably as near to friends as Jesus ever had. It was here that the story was told of the miracle – Lazarus has been dead four days when Jesus comes to the tomb – look, there is the traditional site over there – and roars into the dark depths "Lazarus, come out!" – and the dead man walks. It was here, in this place, that a woman knelt at the feet of Jesus and anointed him with precious ointment. It was here that they found the donkey on which they sat Jesus. And it is here, at Bethany, that we too begin our journey to Jerusalem.

It was an easier journey then. There was no wall, no separation barrier. You could just walk from Bethany to Jerusalem. These days we have to find a checkpoint: and the nearest one is the notorious Checkpoint 300. It is my friend Omar who is our guide: he and his wife and their son, a Palestinian Christian family. At this point their son leaves us. He has only been home for three weeks, and so was not able to apply for a permit to pass through, an application which takes four weeks to process. Omar and his wife have permits: but the soldiers tell her she has to go home because they are not letting her through even though she has the paper. So Omar joins the queue alone: and we meet him on the other side four hours later. That is the time it takes him to squeeze through the long metal cage. Meanwhile you and I stroll through in a couple of minutes. Of course, unlike Omar, we weren't born here.

Now we make our way to the top of the hill. We know where we are going. We are following the route taken by Jesus on Palm Sunday. We know we are heading for Jerusalem. But nothing prepares you for it. Up the hill, round and down to the left, and there it is: spread out before you, Jerusalem the Golden. Your heart stops beating. Nothing ever again will quite compare with your first sight of Jerusalem.

The skyline is dominated by the Dome of the Rock. This huge dome of gold is the third holiest site in Islam: from where, the story goes, the prophet Mohammed began his night journey into heaven. So it is a vivid reminder of the history of Jerusalem, holy to Jews, holy to Christians, holy to Muslims. For most of the last two thousand years it has been a Muslim city, although for two significant periods it was in the hands of Christians; and since 1948 half of it has been a Jewish city. Once upon a time it was King David's city: and even in these old days it cast a spell like none other: *If I forget you, o Jerusalem, sings one of David's psalms let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.* The old rabbis used to say *"Ten measures of beauty God gave to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest. Ten measures of sorrow God gave to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest.* And there it lies, glistening in the sun, stretched out before you. Jerusalem! Is your pulse not racing? So we begin our descent down the Mount of Olives.

Let's pause for a moment at a tiny church. They call it "Dominus flevit": the Lord wept. It is exceptionally beautiful, built in the shape of a teardrop. The Bible's account of the Palm story has Jesus stopping on his way into Jerusalem – perhaps at this very spot, certainly with this panorama of the city spread before him. Here he stopped and wept: he wept for a city that did not know where its true peace lay. And we move on down.

The crowds are growing, the noise is growing, the excitement is growing. As we make our way down the hill there are children laughing and lovers dreaming and soldiers, heavily armed, on patrol. Indeed, it could almost be the first Palm Sunday, as the procession makes its way through the cheering crowds. And suddenly we turn off, and all is quiet. We have come to a garden. Large numbers of people, but very little noise. Trees and flowers and silence. This is no ordinary garden. We have reached the Garden of Gethsemane. It was later in the week that Jesus came to the Garden: but how could we not turn aside?

You remember the story. It was after his last supper with the Twelve. Three of them climbed up the Mount of Olives with him in the darkness, and he drew apart from them to pray. It could not be long now. "Take this cup away from me", he prayed. "Yet not what I want but what you want". And as he prayed, in great

distress, Peter and James and John, the ones he had taken with him for support, Peter and James and John fell asleep. In his moment of spiritual agony they dozed off, resting under the olive trees. They say that olive trees can live for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. Could these olive trees, at this moment giving you shade from the hot sun, be the very ones which guarded Jesus praying?

Now we rejoin the crowds and make our way down the last part of the journey to the old walls of Jerusalem. There were huge crowds here on that first Palm Sunday: perhaps as many as one million visitors had come to the city for the Passover. There is great excitement: branches being waved and cloaks spread on the ground and singing of one of the old psalms "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord". And Jesus rides on. Jesus rides on across the valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives and up – at last – to his destination. He is riding into Jerusalem . who knows what the crowd are thinking as they cheer so wildly? Who knows what the disciples are thinking on this day – so unlike any that has gone before.? Who knows what Jesus is thinking? "Ride on, ride on in majesty In lowly pomp – what kind of pomp is that – ride on to die".

It is Palm Sunday. They call it the Triumphal Entry. Ahead of him stands the great Temple. The holiest spot, the holiest building, the centre of the people's religion, the centre of the people's history. We look for it in vain, for now only part of the Western Wall remains: but when Jesus comes in to Jerusalem, it looms vast above him. All roads lead to the Temple and now it is right before his eyes. He sees it, he hears its din, and now ... he can smell it.

He can see the sheep, the oxen, the doves. He can hear their cries. He can smell their blood. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, the place of sacrifice. Sacrifice is at the heart of their religion: costly, painful sacrifice and the grace of God. As he enters Jerusalem Jesus sees the Temple. He hears it. He smells it. And at this moment he knows what the sacrifice is to be. He had told them often enough before *The Son of Man* he had taught them *must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.* And now he knew.

*Ride on, ride on in majesty! The winged squadrons of the skies
Look down with sad and wondering eyes to see the approaching sacrifice.*