

WELCOME 28th March 2021 – Palm Sunday Lent '21 B

Mark 11:1-11 (15-18)

Welcome! It's great to be together again. We are delighted you are here.

As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources in your hands. Please use them *so that worship is an all week long experience. As God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives he will then introduce you to someone this week who needs to hear the good news from you.*

We are still doing those things we need to maintain a level of safety: Hand sanitizer. Masks while we sing for the last time. Sign in. Morning tea planned for Easter. Offering. Communion.

As we move into this week...Power. We've seen it everywhere. Power has been ***THE*** (only) ***STORY*** for years...Raw unrelenting destructive power of drought, fire, disease, fear, storms, winds, floods, overthrowing & destroying everything in its path Abusive/coercive power in workplaces/institutions. Violent/domineering power in governments & militaries around the world.

Humans find the controlling/coercive use of power unavoidably addictive. But the purely human use of power can also be corruptive & corrosive...To have more power is not necessarily to become a better person...more often it makes us worse & leaves lives broken, nations in turmoil, fabric of society torn apart or destroyed.

But when Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts & accolades of the crowds we experience the "flip side" of power...power that restores – rebuilds – forgives – heals & blesses. Power that will be laid down so that suffering love might triumph over death. Jesus didn't grasp for power; he challenged the powered, the privileged & the proud so that all people could have access to peace in the presence of God.

From today forward, Jesus flips more than tables in the Temple courts...he flips our world until it is right...right in relationship with the Father...right in response to his love...right as we are embraced in his death & rejoice in his life.

We'll explore & experience that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Gracious eternal God, let the power of your Spirit surround, sustain & excite us. Transform our troubled lives to your glory. Perfect our worship for your praise. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. Where have you witnessed/experienced the destructive force of power in your life?
2. If you were going to ask for God's power to help you today...

Palm Sunday – '21 B – THE FLIP SIDE...OF POWER

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” We recognize the 1st line of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* but it also reflects the conditions in Jerusalem leading into Passover as Jesus descends the Mount of Olives on a donkey to the shouted *Hosannas!* & loud praise & acclamation from the crowds gathering for the Feast. “...best of times...worst of times...”

The Jews could worship in their own Temple & synagogues, but Rome was in control & set the limits of their religious freedom. There was a measure of prosperity but it didn’t penetrate to the masses of the occupied Jewish populace. There was peace/stability/security but only because Rome ruthlessly stamped out trouble & troublemakers. The Jews weren’t exactly slaves, but they were **NOT** free people. “...best of times...worst of times...”

“As Jesus & his disciples approached Jerusalem...” A number of years ago I listened to a Biblical scholar outline 2 simultaneous “parades” entering Jerusalem that day; one from the west & Jesus from the east...But actually there were 3 parades...Palm Sunday is not a tale of 2 cities...but the Power of Three Parades.

The 1st parade...isn’t really anything organized orderly or prepared...It’s the week leading up to Passover & faithful Jews are streaming into Jerusalem from all over. All over Israel. All over the ancient near east. All over the Roman Empire. These are the subjugated masses/oppressed people who are just trying to fulfill their religious obligations. This parade is made up of mums & dads, kids & extended families, travelers, tradies, faithful Jews by the dozens of thousands. Jerusalem’s a city of 25-50K residents, but at Passover the city teems w/ people...200-300K strong?

These are the absolutely powerless. There may be a few petty criminals tucked in among the masses. Con-men, pickpockets, prostitutes, sneak-thieves. But they are absolutely powerless against the unmeasured might of Rome. These religious pilgrims parading into Jerusalem are for the most part, the bottom of the barrel...the great unsophisticated mob...They know there are taxes to be paid alongside their offerings in the Temple. They know if they step out of line the boot that kicks them back into place won’t be a soft slipper. They know what it is like to wake up every day in an empire not your own...to not be a citizen in the land of your birth because it is ruled by someone else.

They are faceless anonymous voiceless overwhelmed who have decisions made for them. They live constrained by custom, law & the force of powers bigger than they are. Even their spiritual lives are ruled & regulated rather than relaxed & relational.

Hierarchy watching & evaluating & score-keeping every sacrifice, prayer, & word of worship. In so many ways they’re just trying to make it through their days w/ their heads above water & living as unnoticed as possible. Want for nothing more than to be left alone w/ their families & small joys & daily successes.

But oddly enough...the 1st parade necessitates the 2nd parade. Rome is **THE POWER** in Israel (what they call the province of Judea) & Pilate (governor) is in charge of keeping Judea in check...inmates in the prison/prison quiet. So every year he knows his chief city, the big deal in his portfolio, is going to swell in population 5-6X over the course of about a month/half. So he is careful to manage that growing rabble of religious faithful, people who follow the crowds to make a buck & all the petty criminals looking for easy takings. He cares *not one bit* about bread & toilets & beds but he cares **greatly** about potential civil unrest.

What’s a Governor to do? More cops on the street...that’s what. So every year the governor would take a small contingent of soldiers from Jerusalem up the coast to Caesarea & requisition from the Legions there 10-20K more soldiers & march them down along the seacoast & over the mountain pass & into Jerusalem from the west. So on this day at the beginning of Passover here they come *en masse*. Row upon row of soldiers in armour. Centurions on war horses. Cavalry. Chariots. Polished brass. Flags, drums, marching chants, swords & spears sharp & shiny. The message is clear: “We rule here. We are in charge here. We are the Empire, the Reich of a thousand years. Do as you are told or else.” This is classic “kingdom of this world” power. Command & control. Dominate by fear. Shock/Awe. Intimidate. Obey...even what’s ridiculous... Caligula’s horse a senator. This 2nd parade was to ensure no riots no revolutions no violence...unless it was a Roman soldier doing so. 2 sets of rules you know one for the powerful/connected & one for the rest of us.

I told the children this morning *Hosanna!* is Hebrew for God save us! God help us! & the implication is **NOW**...There is a growing sense among the pilgrims that their *powerlessness* is about to be transformed & the *powers-that-be* will soon be overthrown. Even the religious hierarchy worry & other gospel writers record their command that Jesus quiet the crowds & the shouting...They fret that perhaps Rome will fully exercise their power & destroy both “*Temple & nation*” (*Jn 11:48*)

The 3rd parade looks for all the world to the faithful of the 1st parade like Zech 9 & Ps 118 & Is 62 & Ps 48. What are they? Each a hymn of praise or prophetic promise celebrating Father/Yahweh’s ultimate triumph crushing his enemies & liberating his people once & for all. The images are of a mighty upraised fist ready to strike in victory....beauty - glory - honour – majesty. But the 3rd parade is led by Jesus.

Jesus comes in the name of the Lord as Prince of Peace...Lord of life...healer of wounds...will not snuff a flickering wick or break a bruised reed...raised the dead & blessed children & healed the lame – blind - lepers & granted dignity to the lowest & the lost & the least...The 3rd parade is not a warrior's march but the journey of a Suffering Servant who will offer no retaliation upon his arrest & reprimand the disciple who lashes out w/ a sword. Jesus reveals power in sacrifice...not in his bloodied sword or spear but in his broken body & spilled blood. Only in him is there freedom...joy...hope...love...Only in Him is there release from captivity & bondage of whatever form. Only in Him can we live in anticipation & expectation of that final triumph as the confirmation of what has already been won in his crucifixion death & resurrection.

A couple of things...Mark shares a detail no other gospel-writer notes...When Jesus sends the disciples to fetch the donkey he says, "If anyone asks, 'What are you doing?' just say, 'The Lord needs it & **will return it soon.**'" In these days when his death is imminent Jesus makes promises he intends to keep. *So Jesus came to Jerusalem & went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples.* The next day he will go back in & drive out those who profit off the faith of the faithful...who fill the Temple courts so full of merchandise there's no room for the curious & the seeker & the searching...But on **this** day Jesus turns his back on the form to be w/ the faithful. On **this** day Jesus walks away from human religious rote ritual & regulation...On **this** day Jesus rejoins those who are at the mercy of forces bigger than they are to offer his promise of freedom – release – liberation – life abundant & eternal at the price of his life. Jesus makes a promise he intends to keep...restore return to the way things should be...

Whatever has you powerless...in that 1st parade... voiceless overwhelmed & constrained by custom, law & the force of powers bigger than you...whatever has seized power over you...fear, addiction, bitterness, grief, anger, need for approval or control, constant grasping for more...restlessness you can't even name... boredom or frustration know that Jesus promises his power to raise you to himself.

Jesus knows only one kind of power: Power that restores – rebuilds – forgives – heals & blesses. Power that will be laid down so that suffering love might triumph over death, sin & evil. Jesus didn't grasp for power; he challenged the powered, the privileged & the proud so that all people could have access to peace in the presence of God.

Jesus flips more than tables in the Temple courts...he flips our world until it is right...right in relationship with the Father...right in response to his love...right as we are embraced in his death & rejoice in his life. That's his promise to you...

So...**Taking it home:** Let's return to that 2nd faith chat question...

If you were going to ask for God's power to help you today...

Maybe it's a freedom from some other thing that has power over you...some relationship that needs a new energy/beginning...your work/life setting is wearing you down & you need something miraculous there...

"Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

***Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* - Philippians 2:5-11**