

How Can It Be?

Mark 11:1-11

Jesus told parables to help people understand what the kingdom of God was like, to help them understand God's will and God's way and God's purposes. He told a story about a little bit of yeast that leavened a whole batch of dough; he told a story about a Samaritan who helped a wounded Jew on the side of the road; he told about a son who cursed his father and wasted his inheritance, but then was welcomed back with open arms. Jesus told many stories, usually with surprise endings; in fact, the surprise is what gives you a clue to the meaning of the story. Today, though, Jesus is the story. Over and over Jesus tries to tell us what the kingdom of God is like, but on this Palm Sunday he shows us. He becomes the parable, and gives us the picture of what God's will and God's way is like.

There was a family living on the outskirts of Jerusalem at the time, we'll call them Joseph and Sarah, and their three young children. Joseph and Sarah spent their days trying to get by with as little trouble as possible. The potential for trouble was everywhere. If they didn't keep the Jewish law to the letter, they would come under the withering scrutiny of the Pharisees – those professional keepers of the law. If they didn't keep the peace with the Roman government, they would come under the criticism of the Sadducees; these were the politicians of their day, who did their best to keep the status quo. And if they didn't watch their step, they would come under the spear and sword of Rome, a merciless ruler who kept the peace with fear and violence. So this was life for Joseph and Sarah, and their three young children, trying to fly under the radar and stay out of trouble, to make a life for themselves and their family in a world where everyone was poor.

But Joseph and Sarah had dreams, dreams for themselves and their kids, dreams for their nation. Mostly they dreamed that one would come who could rescue them from all this. Perhaps one day one would come who would put the Pharisees in their place and save them all from a legal stranglehold. Perhaps one day someone would come who could finally rescue them from the Sadducees, save them from cynical politics that preserves the peace at the expense of justice and faith. Perhaps one day someone would come to save them from Rome, the greatest power in the world, the greatest power the world had ever seen. But brutal and cruel. Perhaps one day someone would come. Someone who was wise, who was strong, someone who was filled with the power of God, someone to take up the ancient throne and mantle of David; someone who was unafraid to fight. He would have to be unafraid to fight. Joseph and Sarah hoped. They hoped for themselves, for their children, for their nation. They hoped.

Joseph and Sarah had heard of a man out in the country named Jesus, who traveled with twelve men who were his students. They had heard how he was filled the power of God to work miracles, how he could heal sick people, and cure lame people, and give sight to the blind. They had even heard that he raised a dead man. No one had ever done that. They had heard from friends that he could take on even the smartest Pharisees; every time they tried to trap him with a trick question, he had a comeback that was both smart and wise. They heard he had backbone; one day he had cleared the Temple with a bullwhip! And they heard he cared for people, that he fed crowds, and took pity on strangers. They had heard all of this and wondered if maybe he would be the one? They hoped.

Then one day they heard he was coming. They heard he was making his grand entrance, perhaps staging the beginning of the great revolution. Word filtered through the little village; he is coming, he's making his entrance, it's starting!. Come and welcome him! So Joseph and Sarah grabbed their coats, and their children, and headed out onto the main street. Along the way, they stopped in a small field and gathered some branches. This is how you welcome a conquering king of Israel, how you greet a general heading into battle. When they came to the road, they threw their coats and branches on the road for the king to ride through. The crowd started shouting, "Save us! Save us now! Save us! Save us now! Blessed be the name of the Lord, for the one who is coming! Save us! Save us now!" This was not a

joyful parade, my friend; it was a march. The crowd was not laughing, they were shouting! Their words were ancient, from Psalm 118, an old military tune about victory in battle. Joseph and Sarah, and their children, and their neighbors, wanted a better future, they wanted help, and honestly they wanted war. So they shouted, "Save us! Save us now!," drafting their general with every syllable. They did the same thing their ancestors did, when they drafted Jehu to be king and sent him off to slaughter the house of Ahab. They spread branches and coats and shouted Psalm 118.

Joseph and Sarah peered down the road, looking for the first sign of Jesus coming near. Before long, they made out a group of people in the far distance. There were several men in front, looking like an advance guard of some sort. But they couldn't see any weapons. They expected swords or clubs or spears, or even shepherd's staffs, but these men were empty handed. Before long, they saw one head riding above the rest. That must be him. But something was wrong about the picture. He wasn't riding very high. They expected him to see him sitting five feet off the ground, high on a horse. They expected him to be at least as high as the Roman soldiers who rode around town pushing people out of the way. But all they saw was his head. And then two ears. Then the face of a donkey. A donkey.

Joseph and Sarah had nothing against donkeys. They were much respected animals in Palestine, no one made fun of them the way we do. They weren't many jokes about donkeys. Donkeys did all the work, they were a good size, strong, nimble on the rocks, and donkeys could even be sweet. But they weren't made... for war. No one went to war astride a great donkey. Donkeys were meant for peace. When a king rode off to war, he rode on a horse. When a king returned in peace, he came in on a donkey. No weapons, no swords, no spears, no horses. Just a donkey.

Joseph and Sarah quickly gathered their three children and hurried home, before any of the Roman soldiers arrived to disperse the crowd. It could get violent, and they wasted no time. Who did this man think he was? Riding into this city on a donkey! He's insane, a joke, a dangerous trouble maker. He could have gotten us all killed.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he came in his own way, with his own agenda. He came to in peace, and to bring peace, in his own way, according to the Father's plan. When Jesus rides into your life, and into mine; when we stand on the road, looking for him to pass by, we have many hopes and plans of our own. But the Lord always comes in his own way, asking us to pray with him, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Rev. Dr. Patrick W. T. Johnson
Palm Sunday 2015