

Power Play

Mark 11: 1-11

Years ago, Kellogg's had an ad for their Corn Flakes Cereal—"Taste them again for the first time." The slogan catches your ear because of course it is impossible. You can't go back and do anything again for the first time. But what the slogan means, I suppose, is "Taste our cereal once more, with no assumptions or preconceived notions. Taste it again as if you don't know in advance what the experience will be." And the point is you might be surprised.

How much of what you know about Corn Flakes is only what you THINK you know about corn flakes? And is there anything about Corn Flakes that...you don't yet know?

The same challenge might be issued today, as we encounter Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem....for the twelfth time? The twentieth? The fifty-first? The ninety-seventh? We look forward to Palm Sunday each year because it ushers in the holiest, most world-changing week on the Christian calendar. It's a special day, a

meaningful day, a holy day—but can we possibly taste Palm Sunday again, for the first time?

The only way I know even to attempt it is to go back to the words—**only** the words. A picture's worth 1000 words, and I have too many pictures in my head of what took place. So let's go all the way back to the ink on the page.

The ink.....on the page.

What does Mark want us to see?

Well, if we begin with just the ink on the page, we notice one thing right away: the amount of time spent on each part of the story. The story of the triumphal entry is eleven verses in Mark's gospel.

Seven of those verses consist of Jesus giving very specific instructions to his disciples and their carrying his instructions out.

Three verses describe the parade and the crowd—how big a crowd?—we don't know. Mark just says "Many people."

And the triumphal entry into the city—gets one verse. One. And it isn't very triumphal: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

It isn't exactly as if Jesus gets swept into Jerusalem on a wave—if there's a wave, it breaks and foams outside the city walls.

So fully two thirds of the ink Mark spends is on the preparation—"Bring me the colt, here is what you will see, here is what they will say."

Mark wants us to know that this is no spontaneous parade: everything being done is under Jesus' direction.

In his book, **Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus**, Ched Myers refers to the Palm Sunday event as “street theater.”

With that understanding, the triumphal entry becomes not a popular celebration but a drama enacted in order to have an impact on an audience. So the key questions, as we taste Palm Sunday again for the first time, are: “What is the drama about?” and “Who is the intended audience?”

Well, the drama, I would suggest, is about power—hence the title of the sermon—“Power Play.” I say that because the details that Jesus is so intentionally attending to—approaching Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, riding on a colt that has never been ridden--are an enactment of some particular pieces of scripture from the prophet Zechariah.

The first piece is from the fourteenth chapter of Zechariah, which in my study Bible has a descriptive heading: *Future Warfare and Final Victory*: “Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations

as when he fights on the day of battle. On that day, his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east....the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley...living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem...and the Lord will become King over all the earth; on that day, the Lord will be one and his name one.”

Recalling this scripture is a word of hope to a people long oppressed. Since the glory days of King David and King Solomon, God’s people have known little BUT oppression—they have suffered under the Assyrians—half of their nation and half of their tribes wiped from the map forever. They have suffered under the Babylonians, the temple ransacked, the people exiled, their king blinded, his heirs to the throne murdered. They have paid taxes and tributes to Persians and to Greeks, and now they chafe under the oppression of Roman rule—relatively secure and prosperous on the one hand, but under the thumb of puppet kings and consuls, with crosses by the roadside to show what happens to dissenters.

To the Roman authorities who might cast an arched eyebrow to the dusty roadway outside the city's eastern entry, Jesus is proclaiming—“Your power is not ultimate and not of God. There is a coming kingdom that stands in opposition to your authority. And I am that king.” If the Romans are the audience for this drama—they won't be happy.

Nor, for that matter, will the ruling classes of the Jews be happy. You see, you don't actually have to hold power to benefit from it—you can accommodate yourself to it. That is what much of Israel has done—merchants and tax collectors have become wealthy under Roman rule; Rome has been good for business—the roads are better; the trade partners have been expanded; for the wealthy and the privileged, sleeping with the enemy has been very very good.

And for the religious elite—well, their view has been, “If you don't stir it, it won't stink.” You turn a blind eye to a few abuses...you pay a tribute here or there, let the Romans have their shrines and altars—you let the military keep the peace, you let the merchants fuel the prosperity, you let the money changers set up in the outer courts of

the temple—and as long as you keep the inner court—your inner faith—the trappings of holiness...then all is right with God in His heaven, as the saying goes.

But to these folk, Jesus is saying in his entry—God does not accommodate to the ways of the world. It is not okay to go through the motions of religious observance while the poor suffer and the downtrodden hunger for justice.

To all who benefit from Rome's regime and the peace and prosperity it assures—the little drama outside the walls is only going to disrupt business and invite a crackdown. “Don't bite the hand that feeds you—or poke the bear that can eat you,” is their response. They are no more happy than the Romans at Jesus' street theater.

One must assume then, that the only ones who are happy with the way the drama is playing out are the peasants outside the city. They have no vested interest in Roman power—they want to fight the power with a different power; they hunger for revolution. But for them...well it doesn't take so very long to see that the drama isn't

playing out the way that they want. Jesus doesn't come as the warrior messiah of Zechariah 14—entering Jerusalem in a military procession along the corridor of kings. He comes enacting Zechariah 9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war horse from Jerusalem and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.”

Jesus does not come to bring peace by warring upon the warriors—this is not an invading army, a benevolent revolution, toppling the statues of dictators to forcibly bring peace. In fact, when he arrives at the city gate...Jesus does nothing. He walks in—he looks around. He leaves. What kind of messiah is that!?!?

Jesus messianic claim is such a disappointment that later in the week—after his arrest by the authorities--when the people are given the chance to embrace him and to call for his release...they instead

turn their backs and opt for the release of Barabbas, a true revolutionary who was jailed for participating in a military insurrection. “Give us a real messiah—a power to fight the powerful.”

In short—the power play that Jesus puts on—the street drama that Palm Sunday represents—threatens or disappoints every human notion of power. Jesus questions the authority of those who rule by the sword; he threatens the prosperity of those who sell out to earthly rulers; he disappoints the aspirations of those who want a warrior to fight for their cause...and he lays claim to a kingship of a different sort.

So who is the audience for this drama? Well, the audience is the world. And the question is, in 2000 years, how much closer to embracing this messiah have we really come? We give lip service to his kingship....but we still believe that might makes right. Speak softly and carry a big stick. The one with the most power gets to call the shots.

We give lip service to his Lordship, but we still are too often willing to settle for prosperity and freedom as a substitute for full justice or liberation.

We give lip service to the ideals of peace and of human harmony, but we long for a leader who will bring peace by finally winning the war....ensure our security and protect our interests.

So we limp along, year to year, in a world much the same as it ever was....and we take all of the challenge and offense from Palm Sunday by solemnizing it and memorializing it. But what if we tasted it again for the first time? What if we heard at last the radical call to costly peace and servant leadership and full humanity that this messianic drama proclaims? What if we finally “got” Palm Sunday and the meaning of Jesus’ “power play” with all its implications?

The world....would never...be the same.

May it be so. Amen.