

The Gospel of Mark (4)

The Road to Jerusalem - Road of Discipleship

Watershed

The last session finished by looking at the **Healing of the Blind Man at Bethsaida** (Mark 8 .22) and how that account is used to introduce the theme of the disciples finally "seeing clearly" who Jesus is. Peter then makes his own declaration of faith by saying "**You are the Messiah**" (v 29). Jesus himself may have urged secrecy at this point as the title carried the expectation of a political and military leader but instead Jesus predicts his **Suffering and Death** (vv 31 - 33) which Mark will emphasise twice more (9 .30 - 32 and 10 .32 - 34).

Chapter 8 is a watershed, a boundary between the Galilean Ministry (Chapters 1 - 8) and the events that awaits in Jerusalem (Chapters 11 - 16). Linking the two geographical contexts are two chapters in which Mark portrays a journey and also develops the his teaching on discipleship.

Journey to Jerusalem

In Mark's Gospel the actual journey to Jerusalem is contained entirely within Chapter 10. Mark indicates the movement towards Jerusalem at several points in the chapter:

"Jesus left that place, went to the province of Judaea, and crossed the River Jordan" (v.1)

"As Jesus was starting on his way again" (v.17)

"Jesus and his disciples were now on the road going up to Jerusalem" (v.32)

"They came to Jericho" (v. 46)

"At once he was able to see and followed Jesus on the road" (v.52).

Discipleship

In this central part of his Gospel Mark develops his teaching about discipleship. All of Jesus' predictions about death and resurrection are in this section as to are instructions about the cost of discipleship. The section starts and finishes with healing of the blind.

Summary to Mark's section on Discipleship

- 8.22 **Jesus heals a blind man** at Bethsaida
- 8.27 Peter proclaims Jesus as Messiah but is unaware of the implications.
- 8.31 **Death and Resurrection foretold.**
- 8.34 Following Jesus means taking up the cross. That could mean death.
- 9.2 Jesus' glory seen. Peter still doesn't understand suffering must come first
- 9.17 A boy is healed. His father is a true disciple as he longs to increase his faith.
- 9.31 **Death and Resurrection foretold.**
- 9.33 Who is the greatest? But discipleship is about humility.
- 9.38 Mark uses this account to answer "Who belongs in the church?" Inclusiveness.
- 10.2 Conflict with religious leaders, this time about divorce.
- 10.13 Discipleship may involve a childlike trust.
- 10.17 A man can't meet demands of discipleship. Wealth may be a stumbling block.
- 10.32 **Death and Resurrection foretold.**
- 10.35 James and John want preferential treatment. But discipleship is about service.
- 10.46 **Jesus heals a blind man** called Bartimaeus who then follows them on the road.

Arrival in Jerusalem

The arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem is the event we recall every year on Palm Sunday. Mark's account of the events can be found in Chapter 11 verses 1 - 10.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. He doesn't do that simply because he's worn out by the journey. He makes a deliberate action to obtain a donkey and then ride it. More than half of Mark's account of **The Entry into Jerusalem** concerns the appropriation of the donkey in question. It clearly is important, but why?

Jesus knows where his disciples can find a donkey. This isn't an example of "sixth sense" or "fortune telling", Jesus has clearly arranged this by sending someone else ahead of the disciples mentioned by Mark. But why a donkey?

In Matthew's Gospel the following is quoted:

*"Rejoice! Rejoice, people of Zion!
Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is coming to you!
He comes triumphant and victorious,
but humble and riding on a donkey"*

Zechariah Chapter 9 verse 9

Zechariah doesn't mention palms at all. This leads us to ask the question as to what is happening when Jesus enters Jerusalem and who are this crowd awaiting him?

As to what was happening one suggestion is that Jesus actually entered Jerusalem on one of the Jewish feasts (Feast of Dedication or Feast of Tabernacles) that involved people carrying branches in a procession. As they did so they recited (what we know as) Psalm 118 v 26 "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*". The branches were actually called Hosannas and were gathered outside the city and carried in. That sounds very much like the scene that Mark describes. Note also that palms weren't part of the Zechariah passage, they weren't an expected part of any claim to be Messiah.

This of course poses problems about timescale and historical accuracy. To counter this we need to remember that the Gospels don't try to be historical timescales but rather statements of faith and belief in who Jesus is.

Another question surrounds the reaction of the authorities. There simply isn't one. This is Jesus whom they have already been in conflict with arriving in Jerusalem, and seeming to be greeted by throngs of people proclaiming him as Messiah. We'd expect some reaction.

Maybe Jesus was tagging onto a procession that was already happening. If that's the case then Jesus action may have been a statement just for his disciples and other followers. Maybe it's been vested with such an importance in hindsight. maybe that was Jesus' intention all along. Whatever the explanation it's important to realise that the Entry into Jerusalem isn't portrayed as the beginning of the final conflict that follows. In Mark's Gospel the account ends in anti-climax. Jesus merely goes to Bethany and, presumably after returning the donkey, spends the night there.

The day that follows sees Jesus renew the conflict with the religious authorities but this time there's a big difference. He takes his challenging teaching into the Temple itself. It's a challenge that they can't now ignore.