

“Whose Mission are We On?”

Mark 11:1-11

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Introduction

As I have gotten older I've noticed that I am more and more fond of routine. Every morning I'm up at 5:30 to work out, then I look forward to my oatmeal and blueberries afterwards topped off with a banana. For lunch I like a turkey sandwich and a small salad, and hummus to dip my sandwich into. If my day somehow turns out differently than this, it makes me very frustrated. A day that had started out with so much promise fell way short of its potential.

Movies like National Lampoon's Vacation and Ferris Bueller's Day Off are similar in that something that had so much potential turned out so bad. For the Griswold family, before they even got out of the driveway they had problems with their car and when they finally arrived at Wally World, the amusement park was closed for repairs. The principal thought he had Ferris figured out and could trap him, but his day turned out terribly wrong with among other things getting bitten by a dog and having his shoes chewed up.

The story of Jesus entering Jerusalem is also a story of something that had all the promise of being wonderful, but it ended up seemingly wrong.

The hope of the coming messiah

Mark's gospel account depicts a struggle between Jesus and the crowds that observe and are recipients of his ministry. The crowds want to shout it aloud for all to hear that Jesus is the promised messiah from the prophecies. Jesus on the other hand wants to keep it a secret. The crescendo builds throughout his gospel to the point where Jesus' entry into Jerusalem has all the promise and potential for being the coronation of the coming king to deliver the Jewish people from the hands of their oppressors, the Romans.

When Jesus mounts a colt, it appears to be deliberately modeled after Zech. 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.” The departure from the Mount of Olives in order to enter Jerusalem mounted upon a colt is the beginning of a series of elements drawn from Zechariah. The garments on the colt take the place of a saddle and are reminiscent of a coronation. Riding upon the colt is reminiscent of Solomon being made to ride his father David's mule in order to strengthen his claim to the throne. Spreading clothing on the road before an approaching general or monarch has biblical precedent. The crowds shout Psalm 118:25-26 which is their crying out to God to fulfill the promised deliverance and the kingdom of David.

However, Mark's account of the “triumphal entry” is low key compared to Matthew and Luke's. On the surface it leads to nowhere and doesn't live up to its potential. One is even left with the impression that the crowds have dispersed before they enter the city. Jesus, with the disciples, arrives in Jerusalem too late to do anything significant except look around in the temple. There is not even record here that any of

the priests or leaders of the temple wanted to give Jesus the time of day even though the fanfare and noise from the crowd must have been obvious to them. When Jesus arrives at the temple it is as if it has closed down for the day, everyone has gone home for the evening.

The disappointment in what Jesus does

The crowd is mistaken about Jesus' mission. They treat Jesus' approach as a triumphal entry and shout nationalist slogans about the restoration of the power and glory of the Davidic kingdom: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" They are right that Jesus comes as a king, but they expect a typical monarch, who will establish a temporal empire, and as Jesus states in John 18, his kingdom is "not of this world." Their mistaken presumption that Jesus is entering Jerusalem to purge the nation of foreign domination is quickly realized. The false hopes are dashed as he enters Jerusalem and the events of the week play themselves out. It appears that Jesus does not have a national agenda, but an agenda that addresses worship, more specifically, he focuses on the temple. He drove out the buyers and sellers in the temple. He exposes their hypocrisy when asked about paying taxes to Caesar and tells them to go ahead and pay their taxes, when they would have expected him to say no. He surrenders tamely to those who arrest him.....but a new and greater hope will be soon be resurrected.

The Shouting of "Hosanna, Save Us!"

When the crowd shouts "Hosanna," what they are really saying is "Save us!" Of course, they feel they need to be saved from their oppressors, from their political enemies, but whom or what do they really need to be saved from? Jesus knew the deeper spiritual need they had, but they were so focused on their external situation that they could not see past it, but frankly, they weren't interested. They wanted to make Jesus into what they wanted Jesus to be for them.....we do the same today.

Christian Smith is a sociologist who recently (2003) completed the largest study on youth ever before attempted. His goal was to analyze the religious perceptions of the youth of today, perceptions that have been largely instilled into them by the adults that surround them. What he discovered is a worldview involving God, called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is a human construction, and not very biblical. It's a worldview that uses the notion of God for one's own benefit and well-being. The five tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, fair and nice to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Now initially, some of these tenets of MTD may not sound too bad, but upon closer observation it becomes evident that this kind of belief in God that pervades our culture exists to foster subjective well-being in its believers and to lubricate interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere. MTD states that God exists, to help people succeed in life, to make them feel good and to help them get along with others. God is something like a Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist. God is always on call, takes care of

any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process. Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person that other people will like, fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious. Perhaps the worst the God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism can do is simply fail to provide his promised therapeutic blessings, in which case, those who believe in Him are entitled to be grumpy.

The mission that the follower of this kind of a God is on is to use God to his or her own benefit and to have control over what he or she feels is needed in his or her life. The person on this kind of a mission likely looks little different from the rest of the world really, except for the fact that they might use God's name as one they refer to who helps them receive all these "blessings" in life.

But what kind of a mission does Jesus call us to? Does it sound like this kind of mission? Hardly!! Jesus lives out his mission, and the vision of this mission is given fuller definition in this last week of his life as enters Jerusalem.

Jesus' mission is one of suffering, of giving up one's life, of confronting the injustices that are prevalent in society, of healing and comforting the sick, the widowed, the poor, the oppressed.

Earlier in Mark, Jesus is recorded as saying, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Saving our own lives would be the same as what the crowds were doing to Jesus on that day...thinking they knew what they needed to be saved. Losing their lives for the sake of the gospel would be to turn their lives over to the will of Jesus and allowing him to show them how their lives really needed saving. Selflessness, not selfishness, is the way of Jesus. We think we know what we need, but in reality, only Jesus knows what will truly give us "life" and give it to the full, to reference Jesus' words in John 10:10.

The three things we perhaps really need to be saved from

(as given to us by the crowds in Jerusalem as an example)

- 1) A petty nationalism that divides the world into enclaves set over against one another.

We equate patriotism to an earthly kingdom to somehow be equated to patriotism to the kingdom of God.

Do we really believe that God blesses America over against any other country? God blesses all countries and all peoples equally.

We allow patriotism to an earthly kingdom to take precedence over patriotism to the heavenly kingdom.

This happens when we accept military service and neglect to consider or take seriously the obvious contradictions to such service in the teachings of Jesus. We are called to love enemies, to overcome evil with good, to bless those who persecute us.

- 2) A kind of faith that abandons Jesus at the first sign of trouble.

Do we really believe that we are somehow favored in such a way that we are exempt from the troubles of this physical world?

I experienced this in my own life recently. (story of cancer)

To somehow think that this should not have happened to me would be to suggest that I know what is best for me. My actual experience has been that it has improved the quality of my

life...physically, relationally, and spiritually, for whatever amount of time I might have left. I prefer quality over quantity.

3) Foolish expectations of glory so that we can see God's power truly effected on the cross.

The events of the passion week demonstrate the Son of God willingly laying down his life so that we might live. The life and death of Jesus is not just for our benefit, but also for our example and to show the road that we are to travel.

Misguided preachers will tell you that if you turn to Jesus your economic lifestyle will improve; you will be blessed materially from a loving God. One is hard-pressed to find in Jesus' teachings that following Jesus will result in monetary gain. Just the opposite appears to be the case. Jesus says you cannot serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24). Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all he has and give the money to the poor (Matt. 19:21).

The renowned author Henri Nouwen in his well-read text, *In the Name of Jesus*, describes the way of Jesus as downward mobility. Our culture entices us to a pattern of upward mobility. But we are invited to a path of downward mobility, moving further and further away from serving ourselves to the higher call of serving others.

Conclusion

We're not really any different from the crowds.

We want Jesus to bless our nation above all others so that we might live comfortably.

We too are tempted and sometimes succumb to running from Jesus at the first signs of trouble in our lives.

We too want to use God so that we might have more and be more powerful.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem invites us to something different....

...a faith that is not defined by national lines.

...a faith that empowers us to face life's struggles joyfully

...a faith that enables us to lose our life for the sake of the gospel and to be more concerned about the well-being of others than our own self.

As we enter this passion week, may we consider anew the call of Jesus on our lives. May we take up our crosses with Jesus for the sake of the kingdom of God.