

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Preparing for Sunday, April 9, 2017 // Palm Sunday, Year A

## The Gospel: Matthew 21:1-11

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

## Background and general observations

*Palm Sunday is also known as "Passion Sunday" and is the first day of Holy Week. This week has long been the most important of all to Christians, from the earliest days of the Christian movement. Hundreds of years later, Christians would begin to celebrate Jesus' birth, appropriating a pagan celebration of the sun as their date to celebrate the birth of the Son of God. But Holy Week was by then deeply entrenched as the single most important week of the Christian year.*

*If at all possible, Christians would travel from far away to Jerusalem, where they would retrace the steps of Jesus during the final days of his earthly ministry. It was in these last days, in this Holy Week, that the message of God in Christ found its most powerful and poignant expression, and prayerful re-enactments of Jesus' last days had a transformative effect on those who devoted themselves to "walking in the way of the cross." One way of thinking about Holy Week is that it is a time for us not only to remember in our minds Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, but also—and perhaps more importantly—it is a time to remember Jesus' last days—his actions, thoughts and feelings—in our bodies, to re-enact the dramatic events of Jesus' last days and find ourselves transformed as a result.*

*Thus, one question we might ask ourselves is this: has Holy Week lost some of its power for modern day Christians? If so, why do you think that is? Have we become more cerebral—more academic, more intellectual—about our faith, and perhaps less emotional, or less "spiritual"? Are you a more analytical and scholarly Christian or a more emotional Christian? How do you marry your Christian head with your Christian heart and where do the dramatic liturgies of Holy Week fit in your prayer and devotional practices?*

*On Palm Sunday, our worship runs the gamut from joy and celebratory acclamation to hostility and condemnation, with deepest emotions of pleading, grief and confusion in between. We begin worship remembering Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with an adoring assembly and we conclude by recalling his fatal clash with religious authorities and a hostile crowd. How quickly human sentiment and human allegiances can change.*

## **Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives**

1. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey would specifically recall for Jews in his day a prophecy from Zechariah: "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." (Zech. 9:9)

The victorious one riding on a donkey indicates that this one is coming in peace, with amicable intentions. A warrior would come riding on a stallion. Although a warrior would seem to be more threatening to earthly powers, the prophecy from Zechariah confuses things – is this lowly one "our king"? It is important to remember that this was a time of emotional tumult in Jerusalem, and Jesus comes into this cauldron of emotions in this lowly, but symbolic, fashion.

An important theme of St. Paul's would become "power in weakness." That is, Christians are people who are strongest when they are weak, because God is most powerfully manifest in the weak. Consider your own life. When have you come on strong and asserted your authority or power in a situation that was contentious or emotional? How did it feel for you to assert yourself that way?

Now, consider a time when you conducted yourself with humility and quiet, unassuming presence in the midst of a contentious or emotional situation. How did it feel to hold your tongue and sit quietly through a situation that was raising passionate feelings in others?

Where is God in these situations?

2. The term "Passion" Sunday comes from a Latin word that means "to suffer." On Palm Sunday and throughout Holy Week, we are reliving Jesus' last week, with special attention to his suffering. Interestingly, what we are most passionate about is also what we are willing to *suffer for*. Palm Sunday and Holy Week are about focusing on Jesus' deepest passion, his deepest suffering.

What do you believe Jesus was most passionate about? How did he demonstrate this deepest passion? What is *your* deepest passion? How much are you willing to suffer for this passion?

The Greek word "pathos" also means "to suffer" and it is where we get the words "pathetic," "sympathy," and "empathy." It is interesting to realize the ways these words relate to one another and to "compassion" — which means "with suffering" or "to suffer with."

As a synonym, *empathy* is closer to *compassion* than to *sympathy*. The subtle difference is that *em-* derives from the Greek *en-* meaning "within, in." So the difference in sympathy and empathy is the difference in with and within. One of the lessons in Max Lucado's annotated Gospel of Mark, in a study of Jesus' healing of the leper, reads like this: "Sympathy says, 'I feel bad that

you're hungry.' Empathy says, 'I know something about how you feel; I was hungry once myself.' But compassion says, 'Friend, let's go get something to eat'..."

How might knowing about these words inform your way of being in the world? What might this knowledge teach you about your personal relationships, especially with family or friends you find it difficult to "suffer with"?

3. Martin Laird (author of *Into the Silent Land* and *A Sunlit Absence*) has said that silent prayer is the most natural thing a person can do. Our egos can keep us anxious and striving, busy and contentious; but at the deepest level of our being, our true life is already at peace with God. Being prayerfully quiet, opening oneself to God in contemplation, is about letting go of the ego in order to be still with God in that deepest place of peace, to return to our true life. Contemplative prayer is about gradually dispelling the illusion that we are separate from God. God is both *with* us and *within* us always, and remembering that reality can lead to a life of deepest faith and trust – even death cannot separate you from your true life in God.

Consider how walking in the steps of Jesus during Holy Week might deepen your "knowledge" or experience of God, and how this might lead to a deeper sense of trust. Then, consider how Jesus evinced in his last days both deep trust and human distress. How can suffering *with* and *within* Jesus' passion free you to live more completely into the life God has given you to live?

4. The way in which Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem makes a significant statement about how God might choose to enter our lives, particularly in situations of conflict, turmoil, and uncertainty.

How do you experience God entering into your life? Is it with power and triumph, or is it with humility and seeming weakness? How do you recognize when God seems to be drawing closer to you or making his presence felt more poignantly?

5. It is often said that where humans experience profound holiness and goodness, evil and darkness lie close at hand. That certainly seems to have been the case during Jesus' last days, as he showed the beauty of holiness in serving his disciples, washing their feet, and sharing a meal that would care for them and reassure them long after he was killed. All the while, of course, a dark conspiracy that would lead to Jesus' death was playing out nearby.

What do you know from your own life of this dynamic? When have you experienced a profound sense of Presence while darkness or evil was lurking nearby? How do you maintain your focus on the Presence of God in such times and not allow yourself to be governed by fear?