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Towards Jerusalem and the Temple

The Triumphal Entry

Matthew 21.1–11; Mark 11.1–10; Luke 19.29–40;
John 12.12–17

The account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem marks the moment when his death begins to look inevitable and unavoidable. Although the shadow of the cross has fallen over Jesus' life and ministry for many chapters, his entry into Jerusalem is the moment when the focus shifts significantly and we, the readers, become aware that what follows will involve us in accompanying Jesus to death and beyond.

Mark 11.1–10 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples [2]and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. [3]If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' [4]They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, [5]some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' [6]They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

> [7]Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. [8]Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. [9]Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! [10]Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

The popularly used title 'the triumphal entry' for this event is an intriguing one. As soon as you start thinking about it, it becomes clear that 'triumphal entry' can only be applied in the most ironic of senses to what happens to Jesus on his way into Jerusalem. Jesus is not triumphant at this point. His ministry is not complete. He has achieved only the most superficial recognition by the crowds and even his own disciples do not fully understand who he is. Even John's Gospel, which regards Jesus' death as his moment of glory, could not claim triumph as his death has not yet taken place.

So this is not in any usual sense a triumphal entry. It is an 'anti-triumph', or a triumph subverted. It is a triumph of the true nature of God: a nature that eschews pomp and splendour, a nature that acts out of love rather than status, and faithfulness rather than superficial gain. It is no surprise, therefore, that we cling to this title to describe this event, and rightly so, since it points us towards a subtle answer to the question, 'Why did Jesus die?' He died because God's understanding of what makes for a triumph is light years away from our own.

The prearrangement of the loan of a donkey

The account of the disciples going ahead to borrow a donkey is an intriguing one. It seems an unnecessary detail to insert and yet Matthew, Mark and Luke all include it. Only John resorts to saying that Jesus 'found' a donkey without exploring how or where he found it. One thing that this brief little snippet does for us is to remind us how little, in fact, we know of Jesus and his life. The implication of this story is that the donkey belongs to someone whom Jesus knows and with whom he has prearranged a loan of the donkey for the occasion. Who this person was, exactly how they knew Jesus or even how Jesus made such a prior arrangement, is lost in the mists of time.

What did Jesus' actions imply?

One of the questions that the triumphal entry raises is how much of the symbolic resonance of what was going on would have been picked up by the people at the time; the disciples then or afterwards; the first hearers of the stories; the Gospel writers and even the Gospel writers' audience. This passage is rich with symbolism and suggested meaning, but it is hard to know how much of this would have been recognized at the time, how much would have been suggested later by the way in which the tellers and writers of the story recounted the events, and how much has been read into the narrative by later interpreters. Nevertheless, it is worth taking time to stop and explore some of the richness implied in the text.

It is clear, when Jesus began to ride rather than walk, that something important was taking place. Perhaps this gives us something of a clue as to why Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the little story about the prearrangement of a loan of a donkey. This was a conscious, deliberate act, not an accidental one.

One donkey or two?

One of my favourite little moments of this story comes from Matthew's Gospel, where the disciples are sent to bring not one donkey but two: a mother and her foal:

> 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. (21.6–7)

It is a moment where you can't help wondering what image was in Matthew's mind as he wrote. The reference to the donkey and the colt comes from Zechariah 9.9 (see below) which mentions both. Matthew's concern to show that this passage is being fulfilled here is so great that he includes both. It is much more likely that what was going on in Zechariah was Hebrew parallelism, where the same idea was repeated in a slightly different form for emphasis, but Matthew has taken it literally and included both animals in his narrative.

What he describes is hard to imagine. Does Jesus sit on both at once, or one after the other? The answer is probably that Matthew didn't picture anything; his concern was more to demonstrate the clear connection with Zechariah 9.9. Nevertheless, the odd notion of Jesus straddling two donkeys on his way into Jerusalem never fails to make me smile.

At this stage in his journey, the road to Jerusalem would have been thronged with people. Passover was a feast of obligation and so everyone in the country would, if at all possible, have converged in Jerusalem for the feast. This would have meant hundreds of thousands of people coming to the city. Many of these would have travelled together and friendships would have formed along the way. As a result, it would be possible to surmise that Jesus, tired from the long walk, had simply and coincidentally got on any old donkey belonging to one of the members of the crowd who were travelling that route together. But the explicit recount-

ing of a specific journey made to collect a donkey for Jesus to ride removes any doubt in the matter. Jesus' riding of a donkey was no accidental, spur of the moment coincidence. It was deliberate and pre-planned. It is clear we are intended to read something into it, but what did it symbolize?

It is widely known that victorious Roman generals, when returning to Rome, would ride a white horse in their 'triumph'. A triumph was a carefully planned procession to show the people back in Rome what a great and marvellous general they were. In the procession they would bring all the loot (the treasures and the slaves) that they had purloined as a result of the victory and by doing so demonstrate how triumphant they were. If the notion of a Roman triumphal procession lies behind Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, it is clearly and importantly a subversion of this kind of event. The mode of transport is a donkey not a white horse; the people in the procession all came willingly and were not coerced; Jesus' triumph is yet to come and is in any case (as above) the kind of triumph only God would think triumphant.

So the narrative may bring to mind a Roman triumph, but much closer literary links can be found in Jewish tradition.

> **1 Maccabees 13.51** On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

One very striking passage from Maccabees recounts the victorious procession of the Maccabean army into Jerusalem after they had conquered Jerusalem in the Maccabean war against the Syrian Greek (Seleucid) Empire. Particularly striking here is the reference to the Maccabees being accompanied with praise and palm branches as Jesus also was. While the same objection applies to this as to the Roman triumph – that Jesus was not yet victorious – here it is possible that the actions of those accompanying Jesus

into Jerusalem were intentional and hopeful. It could be that the crowd had this event from Maccabees in mind as they journeyed into Jerusalem and saw Jesus as a new Simon Maccabaeus come to drive a new occupying army out of their city.

Alongside this passage is also Zechariah, and if we connect the Maccabees with parts of Zechariah then Messianic bells begin to ring. There is, of course, Zechariah 9.9, which reminds us of the combined identity of the future king as both victorious and humble.

> **Zechariah 9.9** 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.

This connection may also have resonances of 1 Kings 1.33 which described Solomon's journey to his coronation riding on a mule. But as well as this there is also Zechariah 14.4 which identifies the Mount of Olives as the place where the Lord will stand to begin the redemption of Israel.

> **Zechariah 14.4** On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley …

All of this implies that in Jesus' deliberate mounting of a donkey on the Mount of Olives were enough clues to suggest to the crowd that he was the longed-for king-like figure who had come to redeem his people, and that they responded by hailing him as the crowd had done to Simon Maccabaeus only 150 or so years before. It's intriguing to ask what happened to the crowd following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; they appear simply to melt away as the narrative turns once more to Jesus and his followers, but

why? What was it that so gripped their attention one minute and so entirely slipped from their minds the next? What is likely is that when Jesus did nothing more dramatic, more pressing needs (finding somewhere to stay, locating family members, and so on) took over and their adulation of Jesus took second place in their minds.

Cry 'Hosanna'

For many people it comes as quite a surprise to discover that the word 'Hosanna' comes, in English, only here in the Bible; though in Hebrew it appears here and in Psalm 118.25. 'Hosanna' is so widely used in worship songs and in hymns that it is easy to assume that it is dotted throughout the psalms with as much abandon as the word 'Hallelujah'. It is not, and in English translations is found only in Matthew, Mark and John's versions of this account. Luke, as he does elsewhere, removes the need for including Hebrew words by omitting the phrase.

Matthew 21.9	**Mark 11.9–10**	**Luke 19.38**	**John 12.13**
'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'	'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! [10]Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'	'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'	'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'

If we compare this to its original form in Psalm 118.25–26, some interesting points emerge.

Psalm 118.25–26 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! [26]Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The first and most obvious point is that 'Hosanna' is not present in the English translation of the psalm. This is for a good reason. It is a Hebrew word and all other Hebrew words in the Old Testament are translated, so this was as well. In the Gospels, however, the Hebrew word is inserted into the middle of sentences that are otherwise all in Greek and so, to draw readers' attention to this, the English translators of the text have kept it in its original Hebrew. This, of course, raises the question of why the Gospel writers kept one word from Psalm 118.25–26 in Hebrew and translated the rest. The answer seems to be that the word 'Hosanna' had become important in its own right (see the reference to shouting 'Hosanna' at the Feast of the Tabernacles in the text box below), and therefore its use here is of more importance than simply quoting the psalms in Hebrew.

Cloaks

The closest parallel to spreading cloaks on the ground can be found in 2 Kings 9.13, when, after Jehu was anointed with oil, the crowd spread their cloaks on the ground and hailed him as king.

Leafy branches

Some scholars have drawn a connection between this event and the Feast of the Tabernacles. At that feast it was customary to wave palm branches whenever the word 'Hosanna' from Psalm 118.25 was mentioned. This connection is unlikely, given the importance of these events being clustered around Passover but the resonances are, nevertheless, very interesting and have led some scholars to question whether the entry into Jerusalem

really took place during Tabernacles not Passover (a view that unsurprisingly has not received overwhelming support).

It is also interesting to notice the subtle shifting of meaning in the word from its original usage, to its use in the Gospels and then to its common usage today. *Hoshi'a na* means literally 'save now', and in its context in Psalm 118 is a cry of supplication by the whole people of God that God would hear them and save them. The word's usage in the Gospels suggests that this has shifted from being simply a prayer to something closer to a statement of confidence. In much modern use it has become such a statement of confidence that in some contexts it feels like a cry of praise akin to Hallelujah.

This shift in meaning can probably be ascribed to the popularity of Psalm 118 around the time of Jesus as a psalm expressing the future hope of Israel's coming salvation by a future Davidic king-like figure. In Rabbinic literature (for example, *Babylonian Talmud Pesachim* 119a), Psalm 118.25ff was used with particular reference to such a figure who would come to redeem Israel, so this might lie in the background of its use here.

It is also worth noting that none of the quotations in the Gospels is exact. Matthew and Mark double the use of 'Hosanna' and also insert an overt Davidic reference which is only at best implicit in Psalm 118. Luke's insertion is particularly interesting as it echoes the song of the angels in Luke 2.14.

Luke 19.38 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

The key difference, though, is that in Luke 2.14 peace is said to be on earth whereas here peace is only in heaven. The crowds mimicking of the song of the angels makes them in Luke's Gospel proclaimers, like the angels, of the in-breaking of God's kingdom on earth. However we are now at the stage in Luke's narrative where

time and time again he stresses the future catastrophic fate that the people have set for themselves, from which the only conclusion can be that peace is not to be found on earth, at least not yet.

The challenge of the chanting of Psalm 118 is that although it was particularly associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles, it was more generally associated, along with all the other Hallel psalms in 113–118, as a psalm of ascent, or a psalm sung on the way to a major festival in Jerusalem. The question that lingers then is how much significance we should place on its being sung here, if it would have been sung anyway. The answer seems to be that significance is to be found not in any one thing but in the confluence of events: Jesus suddenly and deliberately riding a donkey, this taking place on the Mount of Olives, the spreading of the cloaks to welcome a king and the singing of a well-loved psalm that looked forward to a king-figure like David coming to redeem Israel. This confluence of events is so deeply and richly suggestive of meaning to someone living in the first century that it is no wonder that the people around Jesus began to draw conclusions about who Jesus was – even if these conclusions did not cause them to continue following him after his entry into Jerusalem.

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Reflection

The events that took place on what we now call Palm Sunday all raise the question of what it is that makes or helps us to recognize who Jesus really is. On that day Jesus was the same person that he had been for the rest of his ministry. So what was it that made the crowd begin to recognize and proclaim his Messianic significance? The donkey on the Mount of Olives might have been enough but I can't help wondering whether, as I suggest above, that it was the bringing together of a number of strands that began to make the penny drop. Could it be that the singing of Psalm 118, as was customary on the way to a major festival, while Jesus was on a donkey, on the Mount of Olives, on the way into Jerusalem, brought Jesus' identity into focus in a new way?

Having said that, we must not make too much of this new realization: Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and the crowd melted away. The human attention span is very poor indeed. Often today we blame the speed of our society, technology in general and mobile phones in particular for shortening our attention span, but the Gospel narratives suggest it was ever thus. Even at a time when there were few external factors to distract, the arrival into Jerusalem, the need to find somewhere to stay and something to eat seems to have been sufficient to pull people away from their dawning realization that the one they had accompanied into Jerusalem waving palms and with shouts of 'Hosanna' might just have been the one for whom they had waited for so long. The Gospel writers give little explanation about why the crowd disappeared and perhaps this is simply because it needed little explanation. Even when faced with the most important news of all, it is far too easy to be distracted and for our attention to fade.

All of this is important to bear in mind as we seek to live out our Christian life. Why is it that sometimes we put our heart and soul into explaining the mysteries of Christian truth, or of proclaiming Jesus, and people simply do not grasp what we are talking about? The answer may be that the recognition of truth requires more than one factor and that we need to keep on speaking, proclaiming and acting in the hope that one day the right confluence of factors will help people to grasp what we are talking about. It may also be that action rich with meaning (like Jesus' riding a donkey on the Mount of Olives) can speak far more loudly than words, and perhaps we need to pay as much attention to what we do and how we do it as to what we say.

Alongside this we need to recognize that all human nature is fickle, and that we cannot always process or stay with a dawning realization of truth. If the crowd could not even linger in Jerusalem with Jesus for a day or two after shouting 'Hosanna' and waving palms no wonder we also struggle to stay with and live out our recognition of who Jesus really is when we encounter him in our lives. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't try but it does offer us a level of forgiveness when we fail.

The Cursing of the Fig Tree, the Cleansing of the Temple and the Parable of the Tenants

Matthew 21.12–43; Mark 11.11—12.12

If the number of emails I receive from panic-stricken preachers in the week before this passage is set in the lectionary is anything to go by, one of the passages that seems to strike some of the greatest terror into preachers' hearts is the passage of the Cursing of the Fig Tree in Mark. Many difficult passages in the Gospels are just that, difficult passages, and as a New Testament expert I can do little more than sympathize with the lot of having to preach on said passage and offer a few hints that might help people get into it better. This much-feared passage, however, is not all that difficult when you read it in its context and appreciate what is going on beneath the narrative in Mark's Gospel.

Mark 11.11–25 and 12.1–12 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.

12On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

15Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; 16and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?
But you have made it a den of robbers.'

18And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. 19And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. 21Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' 22Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. 23Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. 24So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

12.1–12 Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 2When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. 3But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. 4And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. 5Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. 6He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 7But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." 8So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. 9What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10Have you not read this scripture:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
11this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?'
12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Psalm 118 in Mark's account

In order for it to make sense you need to do two things:

- Read the whole sweep of the passage including the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Parable of the Tenants.
- Recognize the importance of Psalm 118 behind Mark's narrative.

Although Psalm 118 is used in all the Gospels in some form or another at this point, it is in Mark's Gospel that it is stitched carefully and thoughtfully into a large sweep of the narrative. This begins at the triumphal entry with the quotation from Psalm 118.25.

Mark 11.9–10
'Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

And reaches its climax in the Parable of the Tenants, in which is a quotation from Psalm 118.22.

Mark 12.10–11 ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
[11]this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.’

The presence of two apparently unconnected verses from the same psalm may appear to provide underwhelming proof of connection until you reflect upon the context in which they are placed.

Psalm 118 records the victory of a king, probably a Davidic king, returning from battle. It is set in the context of a song of praise for victory which the people greeting the returning king are to pick up and join in with. Verses 1–18 describe the battle and the way that God intervened to bring about victory.

Psalm 118.19–29
Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
[20]This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
[21]I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
[22]The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
[23]This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.
[24]This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
[25]Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
[26]Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
[27]The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

> [28]You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
> you are my God, I will extol you.
> [29]O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
> for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Many scholars agree that verses 19 to the end recount the king's arrival at the temple gates (19), a response by the gatekeepers to remind him and others that these are the gates of righteousness (20), a personal thanksgiving by the king for salvation (21), the testimony of the accompanying people that they recognize what God has done (22–25), and then a response by the priests of the temple who bless the one who has come in the name of the Lord and lead him in celebrating his victory (26–27), followed by more thanksgiving (28–29).

What is important for our story in the Gospels is that verses 25 'Hosanna' and 26 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' are a conversation between the crowd who accompany the king and the priests in the temple. In other words the crowd beg God for salvation ('Save us we beseech you, O Lord') and the priests respond with a recognition of who the king is and an assurance God has blessed him.

In stark contrast, in the Gospels, the crowd sing both parts (the plea for salvation and the blessing), because the temple authorities are at first absolutely silent and then look for a way to kill Jesus. There is no recognition or blessing of Jesus from the temple in Mark. This reaches its climax in Mark 11.27—12.12 when Jesus enters into direct conflict with the chief priests, the scribes and the elders and they decide that he must die.

Mark stresses the absence of their blessing from Jesus' triumphal entry by having Jesus going directly to the temple after entering Jerusalem. The cries of 'Hosanna' on the way are the perfect cue for the priests to respond as they do in Psalm 118, but instead there is an eerie silence. Luke highlights the absence in a different way by having the Pharisees (who though not priests symbolize for Luke Jewish authority) ask Jesus to shut his disciples up.

It is here that the significance of the fig tree comes to the fore and Mark makes sure we see its significance by wrapping the narrative about the fig tree around the story of the Cleansing of the Temple and then Jesus' conversation with the chief priests, scribes and elders. In Mark the order goes:

- The triumphal entry (Mark 11.1–10).
- Jesus went to the temple but was not welcomed by the priests and went to Bethany again (11.11).
- Jesus returned to Jerusalem and on the way cursed the fig tree (11.12–14).
- Jesus 'cleansed' the temple (11.15–19).
- The next morning they see that the fig tree has withered (11.20–25).
- Jesus converses with the chief priests and ends up telling the Parable of the Tenants.

In the Old Testament, fig trees symbolize God's blessing and abundance. Regular reference is made throughout the Old Testament to lack of figs on the fig trees as a symbol of Israel's spiritual barrenness.

Jeremiah 8.13 When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

And conversely to the longed-for future when everyone could eat from their own vine and fig tree and would have so much that they would be able to share it with others.

Zechariah 3.10 On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree.

As a result fruitful fig trees – like vineyards – symbolized the glorious future that God had in store for his people, but fig trees with no fruit are of little use to anyone. Even more importantly fig trees have the next season's fruit on them even when they are not in fruiting season, so a fig tree without any fruit on it at all is not going to fruit in either the short or the long term. In wrapping this story around the Cleansing of the Temple, Mark is showing us how to understand what Jesus did in the temple.

The Cursing of the Temple and the Fig Tree

The Cleansing of the Temple has long caused heated discussion among scholars. The popular interpretation of Jesus' action is that he objected to the merchants changing money and selling animals in the temple precincts. The problem is that the whole temple cult relied on this. Temple tax was paid in shekels not denarii (the Roman coinage) so the people of Israel needed to change their money in order to pay the tax. The simplest place to do this was the temple itself. In addition to this, the sacrificial system in the temple required the animals that people wished to offer for sacrifice to have been checked for purity by temple officials and to be 'without blemish' (see Exodus 12.5; Leviticus 1.3). In his defence of Judaism, *Against Apion* 2.108, Josephus indicated that there were 20,000 priests in Israel in the first century. Even if this number is an over-exaggeration, there was a large number of priests in this period. At a major festival such as Passover they would all have been on duty. If you extrapolate outwards from the number of priests to how many sacrifices they would have done, then not only does the temple become very smelly and very messy, but also very busy. The only realistic way of sacrificing this many animals was to pre-certify the animals as clean. The animal traders in the temple were simply selling the pre-certified animals to the worshippers.

Given this, Jesus' action may well have been more symbolic in intention. It was probably not designed to criticize the money-changers or animal traders but to be, in fact, a more far-reaching critique of the whole temple system. This seems to be confirmed

by the fact that his 'cleansing' did not appear to disrupt the temple worship much: the woman paying her temple tax in Mark 12.41–44 remained able to do so only a short time later and the Passover also went ahead unaffected.

This interpretation is also supported by the subsequent telling of the Parable of the Tenants which in its turn critiqued the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. The point of that parable is that the tenants did not do what they were meant to do: they were meant to guard and tend their master's asset and then deliver to him the profits when he asked for them. Instead they attempted to keep first the profits and then the whole vineyard for themselves. In the same way the fig tree did not do what it was meant to: produce fruit. It neither had fruit about to ripen nor any for the next season either.

Absentee landlords

The Parable of the Tenants makes more sense when you recognize the prevalence of absentee landlords particularly in Galilee. Although the law forbade inequity and the unfair accumulation of land, by the time of the first century there were a large number of landowners who owned significant tracts of land. Many owned high-quality farming land but lived in Jerusalem. The people to whom Jesus was speaking in this parable were quite probably absentee landlords themselves, so the parable would have had been even more hard-hitting.

This leads to the conclusion that Jesus' problem with the temple was not sacrifice, the changing of money nor indeed the selling of animals but, like the tenants in the vineyard and the fig tree, it was not doing what it was meant to do. The temple was meant to be the gateway to heaven, to be the place where God could be present on earth. As such it should have been the place where God's son, the longed-for king-figure like David, was recognized, welcomed and blessed (as the king was in Psalm 118). But, not

only did the priests not bless Jesus on his arrival into Jerusalem, they also sought ways to kill him.

The quotation Jesus cites seems to support this: 'He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers"' (Mark 11.17). The first half of the quotation is drawn from Isaiah 56.6–8.

Isaiah 56.6–8

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—
[7]these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
[8]Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

This passage looks forward to the role the temple will play on 'the day of the Lord' when God will intervene to save his people. On that day people from all nations of the world will stream to the temple and be joyful in God's house of prayer. Instead of this the temple of Jesus' day excluded and rejected people – even Jesus who had come to save God's people – and become instead a den of robbers, as the temple is called in Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 7.11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Mark deliberately emphasizes this by his choice of the Greek word, *lēstēs*. This means more than just a thief and instead refers to a politically motivated outlaw whose goal was to overthrow the current system. Jesus' accusation that the temple had become a den of outlaws implies that he is claiming that those ruling the temple are seeking power for themselves and by so doing are overthrowing God's power. They have, effectively, stolen the temple and are using it for their own political gain. In short, the temple was not doing what it ought to have done and Jesus' action cursed it, just like he cursed the fig tree.

The Cleansing of the Temple in John (John 2.13–22)

The account of the Cleansing of the Temple in John's Gospel is noteworthy for two main reasons. The first is, of course, because it is much, much earlier in the chronology of the narrative. In John, Jesus cleanses the temple as one of the first things he does in his ministry. Although some scholars have argued that Jesus cleansed the temple twice, once at the start of his ministry and once at the end, few are persuaded by this as a theory. Much more likely, given the way John writes, is that he has put the event at the start of Jesus' ministry for a particular reason. You do not have to read far in John before you realize that, more than in any other Gospel, its whole focus is the cross and the coming of the 'hour' in which Jesus will be glorified. Theming the Gospel with three Passover festivals and putting the Cleansing of the Temple at the start serves to remind us of this focus. It also means that Jesus provokes the Jewish authorities to anger also at the beginning and this opposition hangs over the rest of the Gospel.

Second, the account in John is much more detailed than in the other Gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke mention is only made of the selling of doves; John also mentions cattle and sheep. John gives the vivid image of Jesus spilling the coins and driving out the traders with a whip. The words used by Jesus are also different. Here the reference is to Zechariah 14.21: 'And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts

on that day.' This puts the focus of John's telling of the event much more on the end times, when trading is no longer needed because God will be present among his people in a new way.

As a result, the meaning of the event changes in John and picks up the themes of John's prologue. Now the Word made flesh is present in the midst of the people, there is no more need for the temple to function as it always has. In John, then, the cleansing is a sign of the end times proclaimed by the Word made flesh and living among us.

In Mark's Gospel, I would suggest that we might be better to call this whole incident 'The Cursing of the Fig Tree and the Temple' since that then draws our attention to the whole event. What is important is that after the cursing, the fig tree withered and died. Jesus' action in the temple, then, was more than 'just' a criticism; it has the suggestion of a prophetic action. Just as the fig tree withered and died, so too would the temple: and, of course, we now know that it did in AD 70. Mark's Gospel suggests the roots of that destruction could be found 40 years or so earlier in Jesus' actions in the temple.

Matthew's Fig Tree (Matthew 21.18–22)

Matthew's version of the Cursing of the Fig Tree changes its meaning quite significantly. In Matthew the whole event takes place after the Cleansing of the Temple and the fig tree withered immediately. As a result, in Matthew, the whole episode becomes much more about the power of faith and prayer than about the cursing of the temple.

This short account offers a fascinating vignette on the Gospel writers' art. Whenever we recount things we have to make constant decisions about where to place emphasis and what each event means. The Gospel writers were constantly faced with this question. What fascinates me is those occasions when they have clearly come to different decisions on the importance of an event.

In my view the fig tree is one of those occasions. Mark sees the event as an overarching way of interpreting what Jesus did in the temple; whereas Matthew sees the event in a more focused way about prayer and its power.

Reading the Cleansing of the Temple like this, ties the event much more closely to the 'apocalyptic' chapters of Mark 13, Matthew 24 and Luke 21 which talk in such vivid language about a cataclysm to come. It can be tempting to read these chapters as an odd insertion into the last week of Jesus' life with little connection to the other events mentioned in surrounding chapters, but if this reading of the Cleansing of the Temple is correct then the apocalyptic chapters fit fully and properly into this last week of Jesus' life. The cataclysm of Jesus' death is approaching but the events do not end there. The ripples of what is about to happen will continue to spread and to affect the world long after Jesus' death and resurrection, not only at the destruction of the temple 40 years later but onwards from there to the end times. There is insufficient space in this book to tackle the 'apocalyptic' chapters and the extensive scholarly discussions that have taken place about what these chapters refer to (the future end or the destruction of the temple, or a mixture of both). In some ways it is a shame that these chapters are transferred in people's minds to Advent rather than Holy Week because it removes them from the last week of Jesus' life and their close intermingling with Jesus' approaching death. In terms of devotion within the churches, however, Advent is where they are to be found and so will not be explored in detail here. Nevertheless it is worth being aware of the way in which Jesus' actions and interactions during this week time and time again focus the attention onto a future beyond his death and resurrection.

* * *

Reflection

The Cursing of the Temple and the Fig Tree remind us powerfully of the profound importance of institutions living up to their calling. The temple officials had excellent reasons for failing to ensure that the temple was 'a house of prayer for all nations'. They lived day to day attempting simply to survive. Life with an occupying Roman army was precarious at the best of times and an occasion when the city was full to bursting with pilgrims for a major festival was not the best of times. The chief priests' task was not an enviable one. The Romans held them to account for what went on. It is hardly surprising that they were unable to recognize and welcome the presence of Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God, in their midst.

It may be understandable why leaders of the people were unable to welcome Jesus for who he really was, but they failed to do so and Jesus' action in the temple condemned this failure. This brings us to reflect on our own institutional failures: understandable they may be but failures they remain. Our churches do not quite face the same challenge as the temple did, since the advent of Jesus means that God can be encountered in many different places and contexts; nevertheless we are still called to draw people to God and where we fail to do that we should take this failure seriously and ask for forgiveness.

Our vocations, however, are not just corporate and institutional but also personal and individual. Each one of us is called to live up to our calling and to be who God calls us to be. The fig tree's vocation was straightforward and easy to discern: it should produce fruit. The question for each one of us is – What is our vocation? What is our equivalent of producing fruit? And are we confident that we will be fruiting in both the short and the long term? While the answer to these questions will be different for each one of us, there is a strand to vocation that affects us all. The temple officials' major failure was their inability to recognize, proclaim, welcome and bless God when he appeared in their midst. Much of Jesus' teaching in the week following

these events in the temple focuses around discernment and recognition.

The most obvious place is slightly later on in Mark 13.28–29 where we find another fig tree; the Parable of the Fig Tree. As Jesus observes, when the fig tree gets leaves everyone knows how to read what these leaves mean: that summer was coming. Jesus' followers needed to become equally astute readers of the signs of the kingdom. This remains as true now as it ever was. We should all be people who strain with every fibre of our being to recognize God and the actions of God whenever and wherever they break into our world – even when that in-breaking takes the most unexpected and least desired of forms.

Between the Cleansing of the Temple and the Last Supper

Mark 12.13—14.9; Matthew 21.14—26.13; Luke 19.41—21.38

Between the Cleansing of the Temple and the preparations for the last supper we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke a range of conversations and responses to Jesus. There are far too many to do them all justice but it is worth noting the sweep of events included in each Gospel (since although some details differ the major foci remain the same). It is also worth picking out a few key passages which illustrate the whole.

Matthew		Mark		Luke	
21.23–27	Questioning of Jesus' authority by chief priests and elders.	**11.27–31**	Questioning of Jesus' authority by chief priests and elders.	**20.1–8**	Questioning of Jesus' authority by chief priests and scribes.
21.28–32	Parable of the Two Sons.				
21.33–46	Parable of the Tenants.	**12.1–12**	Parable of the Tenants.	**20.9–19**	Parable of the Tenants.
22.1–14	Parable of the Wedding Banquet.				
22.15–22	Question about tax.	**12.13–17**	Question about tax.	**20.21–26**	Question about tax.
22.23–33	Question about resurrection.	**12.18–27**	Question about resurrection.	**20.27–39**	Question about resurrection.
22.34–40	Question about the law.	**12.28–34**	Question about the law.		
22.41–43	Jesus asks a question about the Messiah.	**12.35–37**	Jesus asks a question about the Messiah.	**20.40–45**	Jesus asks a question about the Messiah.
23.1–36	Woes to scribes and Pharisees.	**12.37–40**	Beware the scribes.	**20.46–47**	Beware the scribes.

Matthew		Mark		Luke	
		12.41–44	Widow's mite.	**21.1–4**	Widow's mite.
23.37–39	Jesus laments over Jerusalem.			**19.41–44**	Jesus laments over Jerusalem.
24.1–51	Signs of the end.	**13.1–37**	Signs of the end.	**21.5–38**	Signs of the end.
25.1–13	Parable of the Bridesmaids.				
25.14–30	Parable of the Talents.				
25.31–46	Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.				
26.1–5	Leaders conspire to kill Jesus.	**14.1–2**	Leaders conspire to kill Jesus.	**22.1–2**	Leaders conspire to kill Jesus.
26.6–13	Anointing of Jesus' feet.	**14.3–9**	Anointing of Jesus' feet.		
26.14–16	Judas' decision to betray Jesus.	**14.10–11**	Judas' decision to betray Jesus.	**22.3–7**	Judas' decision to betray Jesus.

While tables can be dull and hard to read, the value of one like this is that it helps us to see at a glance what is going on in the telling of the story in each of the Gospels. When laid out like this it is easy to see that although Matthew's Gospel contains many more stories than the other Gospels, these are stories of a very similar kind to the ones already in Mark and Luke. The focus of this material in all the Gospels is on Jesus' increasing conflict with the Jewish authorities. They came to him and asked challenging questions about authority, about tax, about resurrection and about the law. He in his turn defeated their questioning time and time again, challenging them about their attitude to the Messiah and turning the attention of the disciples to the future and the signs of the end.

When you realize this it becomes clear that the additional material in Matthew's Gospel contributes simply a few more examples of a similar type of teaching.

There are two blocks of additional parables in Matthew. The first block of parables in chapter 21 contains additional reflections on who is worthy to inherit the kingdom and the second block of parables in chapter 25 keeps the focus of chapter 24 a little longer in offering reflections on what we should do while waiting for the end. All in all, whether in Matthew's longer account or Mark and Luke's shorter ones the overall impression of this material is of ever-increasing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, a conflict that can have only one outcome.

In the midst of this conflict, three small stories stand out and are worthy of further reflection.

The Widow's Gift

Mark 12.41–44; Luke 21.1–4

> **Mark 12.41–44** He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

The well-known and well-loved story of the Widow's Gift is not in Matthew's Gospel but is in Mark and Luke. It is not hard to work out why this is. The widow in Mark and Luke symbolizes a person whose attitude to God is right. Unlike the scribes mentioned in the previous passage, this widow was not seeking her own glory or exploiting others for her own benefit, but instead

responded to the generosity of God out of the little that she had with a generosity of her own. Matthew has less need for such a story since he had already included the Parables of the Two Sons and the Wedding Banquet, alongside the Parable of the Tenants as further reflections on the question of who was worthy to inherit the kingdom of God. Those parables play a similar role to this story as both imply, either directly or indirectly, that those who inherit the kingdom do so on the grounds of their own actions and readiness not their status.

The generosity of the woman is stressed in both Gospels by the fact that she threw in two coins. Someone who had very little could have been forgiven for contributing a single coin – the use of two coins implies that she gave the most that she could. The word used for these coins is *leptos*. This was the smallest, thinnest and lowest denomination of all the Roman coins. Using this coinage the least the woman could have given would have been one *leptos*, hence the implication of her generosity.

Temple tax and gifts

An important point to notice is that the woman was not paying temple tax. Temple tax was paid by all men 20 years old and above, using a particular coin, a near pure-silver half-shekel coin, minted in Palestine but known as Tyrian shekels (because they had been minted in Tyre until around 18 BC). These coins were only used for the temple tax and for nothing else, hence the need for the money-changers in the temple to change money from Roman coinage used every day to the coin used for temple tax.

Temple tax was one half-shekel per year and was used for the day-to-day running of the temple, for example the sacrifices and libations. Gifts were also encouraged for the temple's upkeep.

We know that the widow was not paying temple tax for two reasons: first because she was a woman and women did not pay temple tax and second because two *lepta* would have been far too small an amount to pay. Instead she was making a free-will offering or gift for the upkeep of the temple (which could be

done in Roman coinage). This only emphasizes the generosity of her act.

It is probably worth adding that the description of the money given to Judas after he betrayed Jesus suggests that he was paid in Tyrian shekels, that is, temple tax money. There is surely an irony that money given for the day-to-day upkeep of the temple was used to ensure the death of Jesus.

Jesus' Lament over Jerusalem

Matthew 23.37–39; Luke 19.41–44

One important part of this final week is Jesus' lament over the city in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' lament took place after he had pronounced woes over the scribes and Pharisees; in Luke's Gospel a similar event took place during the triumphal entry.

Matthew 23.37–39	Luke 19.41–44
'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! [38]See, your house is left to you, desolate. [39]For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'	As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, [42]saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. [43]Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. [44]They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

Although the wording of these two accounts is very different, the sentiment is similar. At times in this narrative we could be forgiven for concluding that Jesus was in deliberate conflict with Jerusalem and its leaders and that he relished the conflict that was to come. Each of these passages brings home powerfully the level of regret and pain that Jesus felt at the inevitability of what was to happen.

In Matthew's Gospel, the lament seems to pick up the theme of the Parable of the Tenants again: Jesus yearned to gather the whole city together and to keep it safe, but the authorities refused to let go of their grip on the city (just as the tenants did in the parable). In 23.38 Jesus says that they will get what they want but will discover that it wasn't what they had in mind. As is so often the case, grasping something with a strong grip squeezes the life out of what we wanted to cling on to so that it is no longer the glittering prize it used to be.

Desolate: the word translated 'desolate' in the NRSV (23.38) is, in Greek, the word for 'wilderness' (the same word is used to describe the place that Jesus went to for temptation in Matthew 4). In other words the authorities will get what they want – sole ownership of the city but they will discover it has turned into a desert.

A similar scene in Luke's Gospel occurs before any of the major conflict of the last week of Jesus' life has taken place at all. Here Luke begins to probe a theme that runs importantly through the whole of this last week of Jesus' life. Luke probably more than any of the other Gospels keeps our eyes focused not only on the catastrophe of Jesus' death but also on the destruction that is coming to Jerusalem as a whole in AD 70. This catastrophe he traces back directly to Jerusalem's failure to recognize Jesus when they could. The implication of what Jesus says here is that the fall of the temple might have been avoided had they been able to recognize who Jesus was and what difference he made in the world.

Visitation: The word translated visitation in Luke is the Greek word *episcope*. God's 'oversight' of the people was the opportunity to recognize Jesus for who he really was. Their failure to do so brought judgement on them, a judgement the effects of which were felt 40 years later.

Matthew's account of Jesus' lament ends with its vision fixed entirely on the future. We noted at the triumphal entry that those who should have been welcoming the coming king from the temple were at best eerily silent. Matthew 23.39 picks up this theme once more. They will see Jesus again (we are left to assume that it will be when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of glory) and then, when they do, they will recognize him for who he is and say the words that were so absent the first time.

The Anointing of Jesus

Matthew 26.6–13; Mark 14.3–9; Luke 7.36–50; John 12.1–9

Mark 14.1–9 It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; [2]for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.' [3]While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. [4]But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? [5]For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. [6]But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. [7]For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish;

but you will not always have me. [8]She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. [9]Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Each of the Gospels has a story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman and Christian tradition, over the years, has done such a harmonizing job on these four accounts that it is hard, now, to see clearly the themes that they bring. A small table may help in clarifying the details:

	Matthew 26.6–13	**Mark 14.3–9**	**Luke 7.36–50**	**John 12.1–9**
Location	Bethany	Bethany	Galilee	Bethany
Host	Simon the leper	Simon the leper	Simon the Pharisee	Lazarus
Identity of the woman	A woman	A woman	A woman of the city	Mary
Body part anointed	Head	Head	Feet	Feet
Objection to the anointing came from	The disciples	Someone	Simon	Judas
Significance of the anointing	Burial	Burial	Knowledge of her need of forgiveness	Burial

As is now widely recognized, the conflation of these accounts led into conflating Mary, sister of Lazarus, with Mary of Magdala (possibly because she is mentioned in Luke 8.2, the passage immediately following the Lukan account of anointing). This conflation, first suggested by Ephraem in the fourth century, was what gave rise to the tradition of Mary of Magdala being a prostitute (since it was assumed that the sin referred to by Luke was prostitution). This conflation is rightly rejected today as being not only unhelpful but untrue. However, the question remains what, if any, connection exists between the accounts?

Anointing of head vs feet

The tradition of anointing the head with oil is well known in the Bible (Psalm 23.5 and Amos 6.6) as a sign of blessing to the recipient. It marks both celebration and relationship and would have been easily understood as such. Psalm 133.2 even suggests that you could pour quite a lavish amount of oil on the head as a part of this, though a whole bottle of oil takes even that lavishness to extremes.

What is harder to understand is the purpose of anointing feet. There is no evidence anywhere else that this was done. Washing feet, as we know from John 13, was common and expected but anointing feet was not. Commentators on Luke 7 attempt to explain the occurrence in terms of opportunity. As Jesus ate, he reclined with his feet behind him. As a result they were all the woman could reach as she entered the room and, being overwhelmed with emotion, began weeping and hence washing his feet with her tears. The anointing simply followed on the back of the tears. This may be the best explanation with the added element of reverence that washing feet implies.

It is worth noting that without John's account, Luke's account of anointing would be regarded as being so different from that of Matthew and Mark that they would not be considered together at all. It is John's account that acts as a middle term between the two, locating the event in Bethany as do Matthew and Mark and having Jesus' feet anointed as Luke does. It is impossible to work out whether these accounts are telling really quite different versions of the same event or similar versions of different events.

All we can do is to look at what function they have in the text at this point. We will look at the Matthew, Mark and John accounts as they are the ones that fit into the timescale that we are exploring. Matthew's and John's accounts focus our attention quite firmly on the prediction of Christ's death but Mark's Gospel adds an additional element as well. In Mark Jesus proclaims the woman's action as, in Greek, a *kalon ergon* which is translated in

the NRSV as a good deed (though the word *kalon* has more of a sense of 'noble' about it).

An alabaster jar of pure nard

The receptacle for the nard is called an '*alabastros*' in Greek which simply means a perfume bottle, but since perfume bottles were often made from alabaster (hence their name) it is probable that it was made from alabaster.

The contents of the jar were spikenard oil. This is oil made from a plant that only grows in the foothills of the Himalayas (in China, Tibet and Nepal). As a result then, as now, the oil was vastly expensive.

Only Mark's Gospel has the detail that the woman smashed the jar before pouring it on Jesus' head. Some suggest that she did this as a means of getting the oil out, but it is more likely to be a sign that she intended from the start to use it all.

As a result Mark picks up a strand that has bubbled through much of the Gospel. In Mark when groups respond to Jesus they invariably react wrongly: the leaders are always opposed, the crowd mostly amazed and the disciples confused. In contrast individuals, who know their need of God, respond to Jesus as he is and recognize him to be who he is. This unnamed, unknown woman is a perfect example of such a reaction. It is unlikely that she intended to prepare Jesus for burial. Much more likely is that she wanted to respond to Jesus with an action of generosity that symbolized the depth of her response to who he was. As a result, this little cameo before the preparations for the last supper sheds light on the whole sweep of events that have happened up to this point. Time and time again the leaders have opposed Jesus, the crowd responded but then melted away, the disciples did their best, but demonstrated their continuing lack of understanding of Jesus. One woman alone illustrated with actions far more powerful than words could have done that she understood who Jesus

was and, understanding, that she wanted to respond to him with every fibre of her being.

* * *

Reflection

It is striking to notice at this point in the Gospel that of all the interactions that Jesus had in this last week of his life, the two that stand out involve two entirely unconnected women. The first, the widow with her gift, does not actually interact with Jesus himself but with God in the temple. Although she didn't need to, this widow came to the temple to display her love for God in giving far more than she could afford. In this way she is linked to the other unnamed woman who anointed Jesus with ridiculously expensive oil. Just like the widow, this other woman was driven to an act of insane generosity in response to her encounter with the insane generosity of God.

It is these two actions that bring into full focus the dynamic of the discomfort that an encounter with God and God's generosity evokes. As we read through this last week of Jesus' life, it becomes clear how much Jesus undermined the expectations of those who had waited for so long for the king-figure like David to arrive. The problem was that they knew what they wanted; they knew what they needed and, as is so often the case with God, what God offered was not what they expected.

It is easy for us to be dismissive of the Jewish authorities. Why could they not have seen Jesus for who he really was? Were they so blind that they couldn't accept the gift that he did bring rather than rejecting him entirely? The answer was no they couldn't and they couldn't because they had too much to lose. The authorities were attempting to achieve the finest of fine balancing acts between staying faithful to their Jewish heritage and beliefs while doing as little as they could to antagonize an oppressive empire that simply didn't understand who they

were as a people. The pressures of the day, the political complexities involved and the pure fear that the Roman Empire evoked all meant that they simply could not afford to think differently. Jesus represented a completely different way of being, thinking and doing and what he represented risked unbalancing this finely honed existence. Rather than wondering why most of the Jewish authorities couldn't recognize him to be who he was, we should instead be amazed that some of them, such as Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, could recognize him.

Jesus' own self was unsettling and discomforting and those who could truly respond to him were invariably, like the woman with the oil, people with the least to lose. All of this brings us to a vital reflection for Holy Week – what things prevent us from encountering Jesus as he really is rather than as we might want him to be? What is too important to us and so prevents us from meeting and responding to the real Jesus? The opinions of others? Prestige? Buildings? Anxiety?

The list could go on and on but now as then we need to be prepared to acknowledge that Jesus unsettles and discomforts us. The salvation that he brings requires us to change in ways we cannot foresee and probably don't want. A real encounter with Jesus should always leave us feeling profoundly uncomfortable. We should feel deep sympathy for the authorities of Jesus' day who were so caught up in what was going on that they simply could not recognize God when he appeared in their midst. Now as then, those who find it easiest to recognize Jesus for who he really is are those who have the least to lose.

On Hosannas

We cry Hosanna,
  and praise you for all your acts of goodness in days gone by
We cry Hosanna
  and plead for salvation still to come far off in the future

We cry Hosanna
  but we're not sure we meant now,
  and here is a little inconvenient,
  and we certainly didn't mean like this.

We cry Hosanna
  praying that the salvation when it comes will be comfortable,
      predictable and safe,
    that it won't tax us too far,
      won't be inconvenient in its demands

We cry Hosanna
  but it takes a woman silently bringing in her gift of ridiculous
      generosity,
  to pour down true Hosannas on Jesus

  Hosannas that, looking backwards in thanksgiving and
      forwards in hope
    embrace right now all that Jesus came to be ...
  Hosannas based not on what Jesus should be but on who he
      was and is.

As the Hosannas fade away beneath the shadow of the cross,
  Jesus hangs offering the salvation that so many cried for
  and then suddenly weren't sure if they wanted after all.