

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 11:1-11

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The spirit of this story is a spirit of celebration. It is a pulling together of the hopes that have been generated throughout the whole of the Gospel story. It focuses the desire and the hope of the listeners on one who will redeem the world and who will change things for the better. The spirit of the story is implicit in the celebration of the confirmation of Jesus' status as a prophet with which the story begins.

The first part of the story is Jesus sending the disciples into the village and telling them what they are going to find. Some question whether these are prearrangements or prophecy. In my opinion, it is clearly prophecy. This is like Samuel telling Saul what he will find after he has anointed him. There are several stories like it in the Old Testament. It's a sign of Jesus' ability to foresee what is ahead. When the two disciples go and untie the colt, there is a sense of amazement that what Jesus had foreseen was indeed the case. Those who are in the village see them taking the colt and ask what they are doing. Obviously, they suspect, and appropriately, that they are trying to steal it. When the disciples say that the Lord has need of it, immediately they let them take it. It is a confirmation of Jesus' understanding of the situation as well as his prophetic insight into what will happen in the future.

The colt is also a donkey. It is a translation decision to call it a colt. A donkey is the antithesis of the usual animal that a king would ride into the city. Usually kings ride on horses. Jesus rides a colt, a donkey. On the one hand, this can be seen as a joke, a kind of anti-authority sign in what Jesus does. It's obviously a sign of his humility and his willingness to accept a degree of humility that most candidates for political office would find absolutely unacceptable.

The expectation that is clearly raised by Jesus riding into the city is the expectation of the restoration of David's kingdom. That is the climax of this whole story. The Messiahs were the anointed ones of Israel who led the armies of Israel to victory over their enemies. The expectation was that the long-awaited Messiah would lead the armies of Israel into victory against the Gentiles and establish an independent Jewish state.

Jesus clearly knows what is coming. He knows that he will be handed over and rejected because of his understanding of what it is to be the Messiah. When he then accepts the accolades of the crowd, calling for the restoration of the kingdom of David, he knows that he isn't going to do that. There is something rather poignant about this story in relation to the realities of politics in the first century. On the one hand Jesus is raising those expectations, and on the other hand he knows that he will not fulfill them. This is a sign that Jesus knew what was coming. His triumphal entry on a donkey is a clear sign that he is not a general. But the ambiguity remains.

The liturgical tradition of reading the passion narrative on Palm Sunday follows on this realization. The story ends with a sober note about Jesus entering into the city and looking around and then going back out. It establishes the somber note of what lies ahead.