

Palm Sunday

The air crackled with tension and excitement. People from all over Judea poured into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Feasts were being prepared. Wine was being stored up. Room was being made in homes and inns for the visitors.

Joyful anticipation filled the air as people looked forward to a time of celebration with family and friends... a time to celebrate their ritual and history.

But there was an undercurrent of something else...something more sinister. For a long time, things had not been right in Judea. The Jewish people chafed under Roman occupation. Roman soldiers were present everywhere.

Hopes and even expectations for the beginning of a new age – the age of God's messiah...filled peoples' hearts.

What better time for him to make an appearance than at Passover? Passover - that great celebration of freedom that commemorates the Exodus, when God led the people out of slavery in Egypt.

A shadowy group called Zealots roamed the back alleys, ducking into side doors. They were in training... plotting a violent revolution...a war which would end Rome's domination. Some were itching to get started.

Many hoped God's messiah would come and kick it off. Roman soldiers were out in force, daring anyone to cross the line.

The High Priest, Caiaphas, and the rest of the priests, elders, and scribes were committed to maintaining peace so that their Roman occupiers had no reason for concern. But they were nervous.

In the midst of all that, the excitement of pilgrims and tourists as they flowed into the city was palpable.

In the distance a royal trumpet sounded. The sounds of hoofbeats grew. The Western gate swung open, and a great procession entered.

A standard bearer carried the Roman eagle at the front, a symbol of Roman imperial power.

Warhorses with soldiers in full armor entered. Horses snorted. The leather on saddles creaked. The armor clinked. Foot soldiers followed.

And behind the standard bearer, surrounded by mounted soldiers, rode Governor Pontius Pilate.

Crowds lined the street cheering and waving branches as the procession passed through. We don't have a record of this procession and the only reason we believe it had to have happened is that this is how it usually worked.

Rome needed to showcase its power and this was a way to announce that power from the very beginning.

There's much we don't know about the response of the Jews to Pilate's procession, but Greeks and Romans in town would have likely lined the street shouting and waving branches.

We do know that even though the priestly rulers had collaborated with Rome for a long time, they likely would have been uncomfortable with Roman imperial theology – the theology that said the emperor was divine – the son of God. And this procession put that god's power on display.

Most of the time, Pilate lived and governed from the Governor's palace in Caesarea Maritima, or Caesarea by the Sea.

But whenever there was a Jewish festival that brought pilgrims to Jerusalem, he was there with his soldiers to maintain order.

At no festival was that more important than at Passover. At Passover, a celebration of freedom could easily become an acute longing for freedom. When that happened, the potential for revolt grew.

On the other side of town, coming from the Mount of Olives toward the east gate, a very different procession approached.

In this one, only one person was mounted – on the colt of a donkey. The people who came with him were his followers who had joined him on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, among them the twelve.

Nobody was armed. Nobody wore armor and their clothes were not royal. Many were peasants.

People did line the road and shout Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. And by Lord, this group did not mean Caesar.

And there's the problem. In some ways, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a parody of Pilate's procession.

But make no mistake, this was a revolutionary move. This exuberant crowd was primarily Jews and here's what was in the back of their mind from the prophet Zechariah –

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ He^l will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

This ragtag procession may have been a mockery of a Roman imperial one. But it sent a message – a message that excited Jesus' followers and many of the peasants in the procession along the road.

Some Roman soldiers who saw it might have just laughed.

But this procession would have sent chills down the spine of the priests and the elders and other members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council.

Because this procession announced that there was another king...a king who would defeat the soldiers mounted on their warhorses....a king who would smash the bows and their slinging arrows...a king who would command peace.

As far as Rome was concerned, that job was already taken. It was Tiberius Caesar, son of god.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders may not have liked the son of god declaration. But they knew the best way...the only way...for them to hold on to their power was through the mighty power of Caesar.

The fear of revolt began to grow among the Temple authorities.

But this king, if that's what he was, was ill prepared for any kind of battle they were familiar with. Compared to the armed and well-trained army that rode in with Pilate, the people in Jesus' procession were a joke.

But the religious authorities couldn't dismiss him. The crowds cheering him on could not be dismissed.

Maybe he was meeting up with the Zealots. His popularity appeared to be sky high. They knew there was risk here. But they also knew there was nothing they could do yet. They would have to wait...and watch.

Jesus' disciples have struggled with Jesus' mission all along. Three times Jesus had told them what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. What was going through their minds as they entered through the gate?

Maybe they were afraid. Maybe they thought it was a ridiculous charade. Maybe they got swept up in the excitement. Maybe Jesus was going to make his move. Whatever they were thinking, they were all in now.

As they enter Jerusalem and make their way to the Temple, anticipation builds. What will happen now?

And there it is:

¹¹ Then Jesus 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.

What? That's it?

Mark leaves us hanging.

In Matthew and Luke, the overturning of the temple tables happens the same day as the entrance. In Mark's gospel, it's not until the next day.

This day...this first day of Jesus' last week...just ends...no further drama.

So with the crowd who so eagerly welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, we wait. The air still crackles with tension and excitement. Something is going to happen, we just know it.

But for today, we wait.