

The Kingdom of God

Session 2 – Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom

In our first session we saw that God's Kingdom and rule were universal, but that in a part of his kingdom – the earthly realms – God's rule was not firmly established due to man's rebellion against God. Jesus's earthly ministry re-established God's rule over the earthly realms and secured the defeat of the former ruler – Satan – but that victory will not be fully established until the second coming of Christ.

Clearly the defeat of Satan and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth was a key part of Jesus's earthly ministry, and this was foretold by John the Baptist:

“1 ¶ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."” (Matthew 3:1-2 NIV)

Right from the start of his earthly ministry Jesus proclaimed that because of his coming the kingdom of God was at hand:

“14 ¶ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"” (Mark 1:14-15 NIV)

Jesus taught that his mission was to release us from bondage to sin and the oppression that causes:

“14 ¶ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. 16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."” (Luke 4:14-21 NIV)

Jesus was, of course referring to the beginning of Isaiah chapter 61:

“1 ¶ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,” (Isaiah 61:1-2 NIV)

Prior to Christ's death on the cross we were all prisoners to sin and blind to the things of God. But Christ's salvific death released us from captivity to sin and reconciled us to God and brought us into a new relationship with him as His children.

When he was imprisoned, John the Baptist wanted to confirm that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the one who was to come and inaugurate God's Kingdom:

“1 ¶ After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. 2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he

sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" 4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. 6 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." 7 ¶ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. 15 He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 11:1-15 NIV)

The belief in those times was that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah, so by saying that John was that Elijah, Jesus was confirming that he was the Messiah. Of course, the general belief in those times was that the Messiah would re-establish the kingdom of Israel by military victory against the Roman occupiers of Israel rather than that the Messiah would re-establish the Kingdom of God. But Jesus was having none of this; he was fixed on carrying out the mission his Father had given him of defeating sin and Satan and re-establishing God's kingdom on earth by means of his death on the cross:

"13 ¶ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. 21 ¶ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." 24 ¶ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:13-27 NIV)

So, Jesus commenced by eliciting a firmer and deeper understanding of who he was. Having made the disciples expound who others thought he was, he then made them tell who they thought he was. Peter responded for the disciples "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus commanded all the disciples to tell this to no one, probably

because such an open confession would have raised false hopes and brought about an open conflict with the Roman authorities before Jesus was ready for it – because of the political connotations attributed to the Messiah.

Following Peter's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus then began to teach the disciples about the real substance of his mission – his death and resurrection.

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Although Jesus had previously alluded to his death, he was now specifically preparing the disciples for this event, and the references to his death became clearer and more frequent (e.g. Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:32-34, 38-39, 45; 12:1-12; 14:3-9, 34).

This preparation of the disciples was most necessary. Despite Peter's confession, neither Peter nor the other disciples understood what this meant. Prior Jewish expectations concerning the Messiah and his mission were too strong. Indeed Peter's initial reaction was to completely reject Jesus' teaching (Matthew 16:23). For me this episode has great historical credibility – who would invent an episode in which one of the Church's greatest heroes was called Satan?

As Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time on what we now call Palm Sunday he made it completely clear both that he was the Messiah and that as the Messiah he was inaugurating the kingdom of God and proclaiming a kingly role:

“1 ¶ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." 4 This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: 5 "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." 12 ¶ Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers'." 14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. 16 "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?" 17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.” (Matthew 21:1-17 NIV)

According to John, Jesus did not go straight into Jerusalem, but came to Bethany (probably about two miles from Jerusalem) first, and then stayed in a nearby area before his entry into Jerusalem (John 11:54 – 12:19).

On the day Jesus entered into Jerusalem, which was probably a Sunday (John 12:1, 12) – now our Palm Sunday – he sent two disciples ahead of him to a village, probably Bethphage (Matthew 21:1-2), to find a donkey and its colt on which no one had ever ridden. They were instructed to untie them and bring them to Jesus and told that if they were asked what they were doing they should say “The Lord needs them and will send them [back] right away” (Matthew 21:3). The disciples found the animals just as Jesus had said, were asked what they were doing, gave a response as instructed and were permitted to take them.

I think this was pre-arrangement by Jesus, otherwise it’s unlikely that the owners would have accepted the disciples explanation of why they were taking the animals. This implies that Jesus wanted to enter Jerusalem in this specific manner strongly enough to have pre-arranged the necessary circumstances. In my view, this was indeed a symbolic act of Jesus whereby he understood himself to be and revealed himself as the Christ, as the Messiah. The spreading of cloaks on the back of the colt and of cloaks and palm branches on the road (hence our modern name “Palm Sunday”) shows both that the disciples understood this well (Matthew 11:8 – compare 2 Kings 9:13) and that the crowds understood it at least to some extent. Riding the colt not only fulfilled the words of prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, but the fact that it had never been ridden made it particularly suitable for this sacred task. There’s an interesting parallel here with 1 Samuel 6:7 and the use of two calves which had never been yoked to pull the Ark of the Covenant when it was returned to the Israelites.

This is the first time we have heard of Jesus riding on any kind of an animal. His decision to ride the last mile or so into Jerusalem after having walked more than 100 miles from Caesarea Philippi can hardly have been because of physical necessity and it’s even more remarkable as pilgrims entering Jerusalem for this Feast were expected to do so on foot as a matter of Jewish tradition.

To us a donkey is an object of fun, but in Biblical times it could be the mount of a king. The riding on the colt of a donkey echoes King Solomon’s riding to enthronement in 1 Kings 1: 38-40. It’s clear that Jesus had not come to slip quietly into Jerusalem. A pilgrim riding amongst all those on foot could hardly fail to be noticed. He was now publicly taking up and announcing his Messianic role – his Messianic claim must now be presented in the capital city of Jerusalem. His time has indeed come. This is also consistent with his public actions in clearing and cleansing the Temple which we’ll come to in a minute.

But in deliberately presenting himself before Jerusalem as its messianic king, Jesus has chosen an OT model which denies any popular militaristic idea of kingship. The meek, peaceful donkey-rider is not a potential leader of an anti-Roman rebellion. A warrior king would have entered Jerusalem on a horse, an animal symbolic of war.

As they proceeded Jesus was greeted with shouts from Psalm 118, a Psalm used to greet pilgrims during festivals such as the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Passover: ““Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest!”” (Mark 11:9-10).

Originally the term ‘Hosanna’ is literally a prayer for help – ‘Save us [please]’, but as time went on it became a greeting much more like our present day ‘Praise the Lord’. The original meaning was clearly very significant in terms of Christ’s coming atonement for our sins.

Certainly for Jesus, his entry was messianic in nature, given the special preparations he had made. He rode not on a stallion as a warrior Messiah leading the people to battle. He came humbly and in majesty he rode on – to die. It may be that neither the Roman nor the Jewish leadership saw the triumphal entry as a messianic act, since neither group mentioned the matter during Jesus’ coming trial.

The temple of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day was a truly magnificent structure. It bordered on the Kidron valley in the east and on the Tyropean valley in the west, abutted the old city of David in the south and the fortress of Antonia in the north, altogether occupying an area of some 17,000 sq. metres. This was the largest structure of its kind in the ancient world, bigger than a dozen football fields. It was not a square or rectangular area, but trapezoidal, with the north and west sides being longer than the south and east.

On entering the temple area (probably through the golden gate which faced the Mount of Olives), Jesus saw in the court of the Gentiles the selling of sacrificial animals and the exchanging of money. Each year, around the time of the Passover, every adult Jewish male had to pay a temple tax of a half shekel (Exodus 30:13-15). However, much of the coinage of ancient times had idolatrous images or words and the only coin deemed acceptable for the temple tax was the Tyrian silver half shekel. These coins were not easily available throughout Israel, so to facilitate the payment of this tax, tables were set up in the court of the Gentiles around the 25th day of Adar (the month preceding the Passover). Sacrificial animals were generally on sale in the court of the Gentiles.

In one sense, the changing of money and the selling of sacrificial animals could be seen as a service to pilgrims – an attempt to make the temple more ‘user friendly’. In most areas there would have been no access to the required Tyrian coins and sacrificial animals needed to be absolutely pure and unblemished, so bringing them from afar would have been a perilous business. However, these activities were conducted with the primary objective of making large profits for the priestly leadership, the money changers typically charged a whole days wages to change your money and another days wages if you needed change, whilst a sacrificial lamb could cost half a years wages. Also the commercial clamour and smell of the animals severely detracted from the God ordained purpose of the temple. It is likely that these activities had only recently been moved into the temple area, as there is evidence that the stalls of these merchants were previously situated on the Mount of Olives.

In righteous indignation, Jesus cleansed the temple of these rather sordid commercial activities. He overturned the tables of the money changers and chased away those in the business of selling sacrificial animals – and indeed their customers.

It is clear that this event in the life of Jesus was regarded as extremely important as it is one of the few events recorded in all four Gospels.

So, what is the meaning of the cleansing of the Temple. In my view, the cleansing of the temple is best seen as an expression of Jesus’ desire to purify the temple. Here he was eliminating dishonest commercialisation. On other occasions he refused to allow the temple to be used as a shortcut from one part of Jerusalem to another (Mark 11:16). At the same

time, I believe that Jesus was also proclaiming divine judgement on the temple. He was not merely prophesying this but proclaiming it and declaring that he would bring it about.

Moving on to verse 16, even the children could see that Jesus was the Messiah the Son of David. The Pharisees didn't apprehend it but the children did.

So, in these events just before his crucifixion Jesus made his claim to be the Messiah clearly and publicly known and prepared the way for him to inaugurate the kingdom of God through his death on the cross.