

A WHIFF OF TRIUMPH
Matthew 21:1-11

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So many times he had refused their claims. After he fed the 5000, they were going to take him by force – they were going to make him king. He withdrew to the mountain. He refused their desires to crown him king.

Two blind men followed him on another occasion, with their incessant crying, "Have mercy on us, Son of David! Have mercy on us, Son of David!" He asked "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," was the unison reply. His hand touches their eyes. Their faith has made them whole. As they open their eyes, He wrinkles his brow. "See here, let no one know about this." His warning was stern. He had a secret to keep. If people knew that He had brought light to dark eyes, they might suspect He was the one – the Messiah. "Shh! Be quiet," he said. He had a secret to keep. But they told everyone. They couldn't keep a secret.

He wanted them to be silent before. Why is he allowing them to shout "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the Son of David."

Though Jesus usually recoiled from such displays of fanaticism, this time He let them yell, this time He just let them yell. To the indignant Pharisees he explained, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Was the prophet from Galilee now being vindicated in Jerusalem? "Look, the whole world is gone after him," a Pharisee said in alarm.

The triumphal entry has about it an aura of ambivalence, and as I read all the accounts together, what stands out to me now is the slapstick nature of the affair. Perhaps a Roman officer gallops up to check on the disturbance. He has attended processions in Rome, where they do it right. The conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Behind him, officers in polished armor display the banners captured from vanquished armies. At the rear comes a ragtag procession of slaves and prisoners in chains, living proof of what happens to those who defy Rome.

In Jesus' triumphal entry, the adoring crowd makes up the ragtag procession: the lame, the blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee and Bethany. When the officer looks for the object of their attention he spies a forlorn figure, *weeping*, riding on no stallion or chariot but on the back of a baby donkey, a borrowed coat draped across its backbone serving as his saddle.

Yes, there was a whiff of triumph on Palm Sunday, but not the kind of triumph that might impress Rome and not the kind that impressed crowds in Jerusalem for long either. What manner of king was this? (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 190.)

The disciples – probably still excited by the triumphal entry – celebrate the Passover with Jesus. There were so many surprises in store for the disciples that evening as they moved through the Passover ritual. John tells us that Jesus, knowing that God had put all things under His power – John begins with a statement of power and ends with an absurdity. "So He got up from the meal and took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist." In the garb of slave, He bends over and washes Jerusalem dust from the disciples' feet.

What a strange way for the guest of honor to act during a final meal with his friends. What incomprehensible behavior from a ruler who would momentarily announce, "I confer on you a kingdom." In those days, foot washing was considered so degrading that a master could not require it of a Jewish slave. Peter blanched at the provocation.

The scene of the foot washing stands out to author M. Scott Peck as one of the most significant events of Jesus' life. "Until that moment the whole point of things had been for someone to get on top, and once he had gotten on top to stay on top or else attempt to bet farther up. But here this man already on top – who was rabbi, teacher, master – suddenly got down on the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers. In that one act Jesus symbolically overturned the whole social order. Hardly comprehending what was happening, even his own disciples were almost horrified by his behavior."

That same evening a dispute arose among the disciples as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Pointedly, Jesus did not deny the human instinct of competition and ambition. He simply redirected it: "the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." That is when he proclaimed, "I confer on you a kingdom" – a kingdom, in other words, based on service and humility. In the foot washing, the disciples had seen a living tableau of what he meant. Following that example has not gotten any easier in two thousand years. (Yancey, p. 191, 192)

"Surely not I Lord." "Not I." "No way is it I." Jesus dropped a bombshell that evening. While they were eating the Passover meal, he just stated matter-of-factly, "One of you will betray me!" They were terribly upset at the thought of a traitor being in their midst. I mean, this was a closed-door meeting between a rabbi and his dearest disciples. How could he say that one of them was going to betray him?

A few moments after Jesus' bombshell, Judas quietly left the room, arousing no suspicion. Naturally the group's treasurer may have to excuse himself to purchase supplies or perhaps run an errand of charity.

The name "Judas," once common, has all but disappeared. No parent wants to name a child after the most notorious traitor in history. And yet now, to my own surprise, as I read the gospel accounts it is Judas's *ordinariness*, not his villainy, that stands out. He, like other disciples, had been handpicked by Jesus after a long night of prayer. As treasurer, he

obviously held the others' trust. Even at the Last Supper he sat in an honored place near Jesus. The Gospels contain no hint that Judas had been a "mole" infiltrating the inner circle to plan this perfidy. (Yancey, p. 192)

If Judas alone is the betrayer, he is not alone in disappointing Jesus. When it became clear that Jesus' kind of kingdom led to the cross, not a throne, each one disappeared away into the darkness.

Jesus is going to leave his disciples. They are disturbed by his foolish talk about leaving them, about going to a place where they cannot go. "Lord, I will lay down my life for you." Oh, yeah? "Peter, you will deny me three times before a cock shall crow."

Jesus tries to bring them comfort. "Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. Believe in God. Believe also in me."

The upstairs room in Jerusalem was stuffy with smells of lamb, bitter herbs, sweaty bodies. Jesus and the band of eleven arose and headed for the cool, spacious olive groves in the garden called Gethsemane. Spring was in full bloom. The night was fragrant with blossoms. Outside of the hustle and bustle of the Jerusalem Passover, the disciples quickly drifted to sleep.

Jesus, however, feels no such peace.

"He began to be sorrowful and troubled," says Matthew. He felt "deeply distressed," adds Mark. Both writers record his plaintive words to the disciples: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Often Jesus had gone off by himself to pray, sometimes sending the disciples away in a boat so he could spend the night alone with the Father. This night, though, he needed their presence.

By instinct, we humans want someone by our side in the hospital the night before surgery, in the nursing home as death looms near, in any great moment of crisis. We need the reassuring touch of human presence – solitary confinement is the worst punishment our species has devised. I detect in the Gospels' account of Gethsemane a profound depth of loneliness that Jesus had never before encountered. (Yancey, p. 194)

When the disciples failed him, Jesus did not try to conceal his hurt. "Could you not keep watch for one hour?" His words suggest something more ominous than loneliness. It is possible that, for the first time ever, He did not want to be alone with the Father.

"Take this cup from me," he pled. These were no pious, formal prayers: "being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." What was the struggle, exactly? Fear of pain and death? Of course. Jesus no more relished the prospects than you or I do. But there was more at work as well, a new experience for Jesus that can only be called God-forsakenness. At its core Gethsemane depicts, after all, the story of an unanswered prayer. The cup of suffering was not removed. (Yancey, p. 195)

See them in the distance on the hillside – a parade of torches. The world has rejected Jesus. They are coming to take Him away – their torch-lit parade, snaking through the pathways of the garden.

Soon the disciples would forsake Him. During those prayers, the anguished prayers that met a stone wall of no response, it must have felt as if God, too, had turned away.

John Howard Yoder speculates on what might have happened if God had intervened to grant the request "Take this cup from me." Jesus was by no means powerless. If he had insisted on his will and not the Father's, he could have called down twelve legions of angels (72,000) to fight a Holy War on his behalf. In Gethsemane, Jesus relived Satan's temptation in the desert. Either time he could have solved the problem of evil by force, with a quick stab of the accuser in the desert or a fierce battle in the garden. There would be no church history – no church, for that matter – as all human history would come to a halt and the present age would end. All this lay within Jesus' power if he merely said the word, skipped the personal sacrifice, and traded away the messy future of redemption. No kingdom would advance like a mustard seed; the kingdom would rather descend like a hailstorm.

Yet, as Yoder reminds us, the cross, the "cup" that now seemed so terrifying, was the very reason Jesus had come to earth. "Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come."

After several hours of torturous prayer, Jesus came to a resolution. His will and the Father's converged. "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things?" is how he would later put it. He woke his slumberous friends one last time and marched boldly through the darkness toward the ones intent on killing him. (Yancey, p. 195)

Six hundred (600) Roman soldiers looking for a rebel. Certain that He and His disciples might try to flee – surprised when the leader, himself, approaches them and confidently asks, "Who are you seeking?" "Why, we are seeking Jesus, the one from Nazareth." "I am He." It was a statement of identity – identity as the man they were seeking but also identity as the Son of God. Like Jehovah of old, He cries, saying in divine proclamation, "I am who I am!" They fall back and are forced back by the presence of the divine.

Look closely. A scuffle breaks out. In the ring of the torchlights, see Peter brandishing a sword, but Jesus steps between him and the young man whose head was bleeding badly. Jesus placed His hand alongside of his head and spoke quietly.

"Peter, Peter, put your sword back into its place, for all those who take up the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you not think that I can appeal to my Father and He will, at once, put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

Look at the odds. Jesus and his eleven against 600 soldiers and an angry mob. They were outnumbered, to be sure. Or were they? What they cannot see is the 72,000 angels ready, at but the utterance of one word, to come to the aid of the Son of God. Yes, the odds were lopsided, but they were lopsided in favor of Jesus.

His eyes now turn away from Peter and on to the mob. What is this, am I a thief? You've come to me with swords and clubs. Why did you not seize me before? Every day I used to sit in the Temple teaching and you did not lay a hand on me.

Rough hands grasped Jesus in the threatening glow of the torches as ropes were brought out to bind him. In the commotion that followed, the disciples scrambled to save their own necks. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a disciple – perhaps John Mark – was seized from behind. In utter panic, he twisted and pulled to get away.

The man had a tight grip on his linen robe, but Mark let it slip from his shoulders and bolted away from his would-be captor. He fled naked down the rocky pathway in terror, pursued by his own fears. At every step he was sure he heard the footfalls of his pursuers at his back. His heart pounded in his ears and his chest ached, but he didn't stop until he reached the stream at the bottom of the valley. There he finally turned to see that he was alone in the night.

Mark was ashamed of his fear. He felt he had let Jesus down. He had failed to warn Him in time and then he had run away at the first threat to his own well-being. Jesus, by contrast, had been so fearless and confident. He wished desperately that he could be more like Jesus. (Paul Smith, *Jesus*, p. 138)

As John Mark flees, naked, into the night, Peter follows Jesus at a distance. At the door of the High Priest, a slave girl asks, "You're not one of his, are you?" "No I am not!" As the slaves warmed themselves by the fire in the courtyard, they asked a second time, "Hey, you're not one of his, are you?" "Are you kidding?" Had his Galilean accent given him away? By now a relative of Malcus was sure – he had seen Peter cut off his cousin's ear – "Hey, I think I did see you in the garden, didn't I?" Peter curses, denies. A cock crows. Jesus looks at Peter. Peter remembers. Peter weeps.

Jesus is blindfolded and beaten – "Hey, prophet, tell us who hit you this time?"

Matthew 26:56b. Have you read the Passion Story a hundred time and missed that statement:

Judas betrays.
Peter denies.
John Mark flees naked.

And notice:
All the disciples left him.

And yet Peter was sure, they were all sure, that they were willing to follow Him, whatever that might mean. They thought they had it all together. Don't ever assume that you have it all together. You could deny Him, you could fall.

When you are most confident of your devotion to Jesus, that's when you'll fall. Don't believe me? Ask Peter. Ask John Mark. Ask them all.

Every day you are tempted to deny Him. The world does not know Him. The world is not comfortable around those who know Him. They will tempt you, chip away at you – look for that weak moment. And you could fall, unless you lean on Him.

I know of no more poignant contrast between two human destinies than that of Peter and Judas. Both assumed leadership within the group of Jesus' disciples. Both saw and heard wondrous things. Both went through the same dithery cycle of hope, fear, and disillusionment. As the stakes increased, both denied their Master. There, the similarity breaks off. Judas, remorseful but apparently unrepentant, accepted the logical consequences of his deed, took his own life, and went down as the greatest traitor in history. He died unwilling to receive what Jesus had come to offer him. Peter, humiliated but still open to Jesus' message of grace and forgiveness, went on to lead a revival in Jerusalem and did not stop until he had reached Rome. (Yancey, p. 194)

...Until he had reached you!

Peter or Judas – which disciple will you be?

Easter is around the corner.