

Mark 10 - 11

The Blind Man of Jericho

Bartimaeus implies an Aramaic original name, which gives credence to the story coming from the original tradition. He is calling on Jesus as *son of David*, the only usage of this term in the Gospel (though Matthew will insert it in the story of the entrance into Jerusalem). The people walking with Jesus - a large crowd, because of his magnetism - scold him, but he persists in crying out. Then Jesus tells them to call him. Immediately the crowd - because of Jesus' authority - reverse their attitude, and become collaborators with Jesus, and they tell him to have courage, to get up, and that Jesus is calling him. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak to run over. Jesus' words are echoes of his earlier words to the sons of Zebedee: *what do you want me to do for you?* Bartimaeus, unlike them, makes a legitimate request, and it is granted. The effect is that Bartimaeus can now stop sitting beside the road begging and follow Jesus along it with the others. Critics point out that this does not imply that he becomes a disciple; but it certainly says that he stops being an immobile beggar, and becomes one with those who are - for whatever reason - accompanying Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, which is now only eighteen miles ahead.

THE JERUSALEM MINISTRY

We reach here the point at which the traditions surrounding the Passion story begin. The arrival in Jerusalem marks the point where Jesus comes openly into view of the stage on which the last acts will be set. The awkward geography of v 1 allows "Jerusalem" to be mentioned first, although the other villages lie between us and the city. It clearly dominates the opening of the chapter because it will be the place where Jesus' three Passion predictions will be fulfilled. As if to habituate us to Jerusalem as a place of fulfilled predictions, Jesus now adds another which will be fulfilled straight away, about the finding of the colt.

You will see how totally Jesus has foreseen the situation around the colt, even down to the dialogue with the bystanders - Matthew predicts it (but *does not make it happen*). The arrival of Jesus at Jerusalem forms a kind of triumphal procession; if Mark's Gospel was written for Rome, as some traditions suggest, its hearers would recognise features of the Roman triumph, where a victorious commander re-enters the city gates and proceeds to a Temple to the acclaim of the populace. Mark stops short of describing the entry into Jerusalem - *only* Jesus goes in and sees the Temple - , and places the really significant coming of Jesus to the Temple on the following day. The spreading of the greenery and the cloaks and the words of the acclamation gather several different themes. Matthew has them calling him "Son of David"; Luke's crowd say: *Blessed is the King* who comes in the name of the Lord. Certainly the crowd knows that he is a prophet, like John the Baptist; they are expecting a prophet like Moses to return to them, and they also expect the coming of the prophet Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord. But neither of these prophetic figures would have attracted *acclaim*. Why do the crowd think that the coming of Jesus is a sign of the coming of *David's kingdom*? It seems quite

certain that Mark, by insisting on Jesus foresight of what will happen, is planning a very precise sign; it is based on the description in Zechariah's prophecy of a royal saviour (9:9ff):

Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Sion! Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming, vindicated and victorious; he is humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will banish chariots from Ephraim, and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war shall be banished. He will proclaim peace to the nations, his empire will stretch from sea to sea, from the great river to the ends of the earth.

We can see Jesus "engineering" his own fulfilment of that prophecy, as a deliberate act; his (supernatural?) foresight enables him to fulfil it with exactitude. It is obvious that his intention is religious rather than political: a political attempt on the city would surely have been followed up by some kind of climactic deed - for instance, an immediate appearance to take over the Temple. This is not even hinted at. The parallels are interesting: especially in John, where the lines from Zechariah are explicitly quoted, and the density of the crowd is specifically related to the recent raising of Lazarus.

Cursing a Fig Tree

Here is an apparently mysterious incident, so much so that only Matthew takes it up. Luke has a barren fig-tree, but in a parable (13:6-9, q.v.). Here we have a distinctly legend-like story which most people will find difficult to interpret. It must be read in the context of the story which it frames - the story of the cleansing of the Temple. The search for fruit is a theme consistently present in the Bible, and the Gospels are no exception. It refers to the fulfilment of the will of God by the people he has chosen. The visit of Jesus to the Temple stands as the fulfilment of the prophetic message of Malachi 3 - the purification of the priesthood in advance of the Day of the Lord. In the Temple he speaks the real meaning of the incident in the central verses:

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations...but you have turned it into a robbers' den

The first part is Trito-Isaiah (56:5ff), and the second Jeremiah (7:1ff). The overall effect of these passages is to present a full-scale attack on the narrowly racial context of Temple worship. "A house of prayer for all the Gentiles" is a shatteringly challenging concept for the Jews of Jesus' day. We know that the Church lies ahead with its worldwide mission, and the words of Jesus in the Temple ring perfectly with the lines of the Pauline mission. The opposition of the priests and scribes is predictable, but what is important is that their refusal of the message of Jesus is more than incidental. He is testing them in a final way which will herald the destruction of their hopes of salvation; and this is the meaning of the story of the fig-tree.

Faith and Prayer

The verses about the efficacy of prayer which follow are not particularly well-placed. Similar teaching occurs in several other places in the Gospel, and it is clear that here it is hung on the fig-tree for no particular reason. The relationship with the Temple theme

is obfuscated and confused by the remarks on prayer.

Authority

By contrast, the verses on authority belong to the mainline of Jesus' mission in Jerusalem. In Mk 1:27 this authority made its first appearance, and it has been in the forefront of Jesus' impact ever since. Now it has become a central question between him and the components of the Sanhedrin. What their indecision exposes most clearly is their disbelief. In spite of the fact that God confronts them directly in Jesus, they are unable to commit themselves in unequivocal fashion. Accordingly they insist that they do not know; the answer is conclusive. They are not to receive the Gospel from Jesus either.