

20 March 2016

#### The Context:

The whole region was under Roman occupation, who weren't always noted for their tolerance and patience with other cultures. The Roman way of rule was harsh, intimidating and expensive, with taxes on the occupied people being high.

The region itself was unstable, having been invaded and occupied many times previously by other nations, the Romans were just the latest.

The "capital" itself, Jerusalem, had previously been invaded, sacked and destroyed but rebuilt again; so this was a troubled area, both strategically important and significant due to its location for trade routes and access to Africa to the south, to the regions of Asia to the East and to mainland Europe to the North.

But more important than that, it represented "ground zero" to the Jewish faith. This was a Holy city where God met His people and where heroes of their faith had lived. Sometimes called the "City of David" after one of the faith's founding fathers there was so much history wrapped up and intertwined between the development and birth of the city and the story of the Jewish people.

It had been previously known as "Salem" in Abraham's time and where he'd been blessed by the king, Melchizedek, with bread and wine after having defeated some pretty nasty kings in battle (see Gen:14). It was then known as Jebus when Joshua with his people entered Canaan, or the Promised Land (see Joshua:15). Later David captured the city from the Jebusites, renamed it and made it his capital. Solomon later built the magnificent temple there, becoming the centre of Jewish worship about a thousand years before Christ was even born.

So the importance of Jerusalem to the Jews cannot be underestimated both for its trade and commerce but more importantly for its spiritual and religious significance.

We have that faith being governed and presided over by the chief priests and rabbis of the faith, mainly being divided into two groups, the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Sadducees – a priestly aristocratic party who rejected the oral traditions of the Jewish faith, accepting only the original teachings of Moses as authoritative. They did not believe in a bodily resurrection, or angels and spirits.

Pharisees- members of a Jewish sect pledged to uphold the oldest traditions of Israel. This was the more powerful of the parties among the Jews. The Pharisees were committed to emphasising the minutest detail of the law and its enforcement.

So each party was entrenched in its own beliefs and authority over the temple, the Holy sites and over the ordinary people.

So we have a historical holy city central to the Jewish faith, governed by people with their own agendas, all the while under occupation and scrutiny from the sometimes brutal Romans they were living under.

And so we have the character Jesus entering this part of the story.

He'd already been carrying out his public ministry for over two years at this point; teaching people of the kingdom of God and of God's love for His people. Of how Jesus himself had been sent from the Father God to save people from their sins, with full authority to forgive. He'd healed physical and psychological ailments, spoken things over people with amazing insight, engaged in spiritual warfare by driving out demons, even raised people from the dead. Some of these events hadn't always involved Jewish people either but people of other races.

All this was done to give glory to God, so that people would see that God was actively moving among His people. And Jesus himself was personally identifying himself with the Father, and as the Father; that he was God's very presence on Earth among His people.

All this had at various points brought him into conflict with the religious leaders, who saw him as a heretic, a threat and a danger; culminating in them actually plotting to have him killed.

Timing:

The whole purpose of Jesus' ministry would eventually mean that he would inevitably be drawn to the very centre of the faith, Jerusalem itself. And so here we are, the time is right and something big, very big is about to go down.

Only a day or two before Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, prompting a wave of wonder and excitement that was sweeping through the whole region, with people coming from far and wide to just look at this man who'd been dead, but was now alive again.

So Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem and the whole timing of events is drawing to a climax which would change the world forever.

Do you remember a number of years ago we had the Millennium approaching .....Panama Canal was handed back to Panama.

But here we have events and circumstances contriving, some might even say supernaturally (!), to lead to a climax at the very least which would be a clash between Jesus and the religious leaders, but which would ultimately still have repercussions thousands of years later!

We have a radical new Rabbi, some even daring to call him the Messiah (God's anointed), entering the most Holy of cities and at a time when of the biggest and most important of feasts and celebrations in the Jewish calendar is about to take place a few days later; where thousand upon thousand of Jews were beginning to arrive to commemorate Passover (see Exodus). It was to celebrate God's goodness and faithfulness to His people.

So Jesus is arriving at this time to open hostility from the Jewish leaders who wanted him dead, no doubt to bemusement and scorn from the Romans as Jesus arrived, not with a big fanfare from trumpets and banners waving, with hundreds of soldiers and attendants as was the Roman way, a real show of strength and authority, but sat on a young donkeys back. A donkey was sometimes referred to as a “beast of burden” by the way, very often being poorly treated, overloaded with the weight of stuff it was forced to carry and then being abandoned when it could no longer be useful. You may quite appropriately draw similarities with that picture and that of Jesus.

But here was the “King” as some were declaring, making his triumphant entry. Hardly a spectacle to the Roman onlookers, and certainly unwanted by the religious leaders.

And yet many were declaring this man to be their “Saviour”, even meeting him on the outskirts of Jerusalem, laying down their cloaks (see Mark and Luke’s gospels) before him, which was a real sign of reverence and submission.

Imagine how that must’ve appeared to the Pharisees, to see crowds of people welcoming with praise and reverence this heretic who they wanted rid of. You can almost feel their scorn and jealousy that no one ever welcomed them like that or showed them that level of praise.

Up to now they’d been the ones who’d got the attention and respect of the people because of their positions within the temple and their standing with the community, but now that had all gone out the window with this man arriving at their very doorstep.

I also wonder at some of the others who were in the crowd.

Undoubtedly there would be many for whom Jesus did represent the Saviour of the nation, they’d heard of and maybe even seen his miracles themselves, so for them this would be a momentous day. For others they wanted Jesus to be a rallying militant leader, who’d raise a band of rebels and face down the Roman occupiers, gaining freedom for the people through force and probably bloodshed.

As is the crowd mentality, with lots of recent studies having been done into crowd mentality and behaviour, there would be people there who would just find themselves swept along by the hysteria and frenzy of the crowd itself. Perhaps for many this would just be a temporary wave of emotion, brought on by the excitement of those around them. Certainly it would seem that only a few days later there would be a noticeable quietness from these people.

And perhaps there were also those who, as in many crowds, would watch from a distance, never quite committing themselves to fully participating. All the while keeping one foot in, one foot out.

Paul talks about these lukewarm people in the book of Revelations; that God will “spit” them out (NIV), or as it says in the King James version, God will “spue” or quite literally, vomit them out.

So here we are, the grand arrival of the King, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Messiah; to on the one hand euphoric praise and welcome, on the other sinister malevolence and resentment.

I’m not gonna reveal what happens next in case you want it to be a surprise next week; but drawing a very tenuous analogy from this, how did you welcome Jesus into your life, into your Jerusalem? Cast your minds

back. Was it with adoration and euphoria? Was it with desperation and the need to be rescued? Try to recall how you first encountered the King of Kings.

Or maybe you haven't yet felt that sense of his arrival into your life, entering your heart. Maybe there's still something that's preventing him, something yet to be surrendered. Or maybe you just haven't fully made that commitment. Maybe this is the time to do that, Palm Sunday. Time to, metaphorically speaking, lay down your cloak before the Lord, to honour him, to glorify him, to welcome him in.

Let's pray:

Father thank you, we praise you and glorify you, we lift your name high in this place.

Father make us humble and receptive to your voice, to your will; to not just follow the crowd or the will of others. Help us to see through hidden agendas of others, and turn away, to follow your calling for us.

Father destroy our pride, destroy our strongholds....in our authority, our status, in our possessions, in how others see us.

Father we thank you for the saving grace of Jesus, who washes us clean through his sacrifice, through the sacrifice of your only begotten Son so that we may have life and love in you.

Father may we respond to that love through this coming Passion Week; that we reflect on the sacrifice but yet celebrate the victory and the triumph that is coming.

Father we pray this in the precious and mighty name of your son Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen. Glory to God.