

Mark 11:1-11

Pymble 25.3.18

...in the name of the Lord.

Author Jill Kerr Conway has written a fine memoir of her family's years living out past Hillston in the Riverina, called *The Road From Coorain*. The whole opening chapter of the book contains no mention of individual characters but instead is devoted to describing the physical aspects of the land. In detail, Conway outlines the landscape, the weather, and the changes brought by seasons and time. We build up a picture of the land and the farm as well as considerable detail about the soil, crops, insects and animals. She opens her memoir this way because the land plays such a central part in her own story – and it is as if the land itself needs to be introduced a separate character.

Likewise in Mark's gospel, the city of Jerusalem is almost another character – one that we must understand if we are to appreciate Mark's story about Jesus. After all, most of Jesus' ministry was in the region of Galilee yet about half of the gospel is either set in Jerusalem or concerns Jesus' deliberate journey towards it. Jerusalem looms large in Mark's gospel.

When Mark writes about Jerusalem, we are to think of it the way we refer to Canberra or Washington or Beijing – that is, it is a geographic city but it also represents the political centre, in this case, of the occupied nation of Israel. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, it is not as a tourist nor even primarily as a religious pilgrim. Instead Jesus is clearly in prophet-mode, deliberately confronting the powers of his day. So what was he protesting?

Let's begin with a bit of history, because it really does help us understand what was going on with Jesus' relationship with Jerusalem. In 64BC, Rome brought Israel's golden century of independence under the Maccabees to an abrupt end. Their powerful army conquered the Jewish homeland and killed their monarchy. The Roman practice was to install wealthy local people,

whom they felt they could trust, as rulers, responsible
for keeping the peace,
squashing any unrest
and forwarding an annual tribute to Rome.
In this way, Herod – later known as Herod the Great –
became the Rome-appointed client king of this Palestine region
in around 37BC and ruled for over 3 decades.

He certainly put his stamp on the region with massive building programs –
the ruins of which can still be seen today –
and it would have been near the end of his reign
when he spoke with the Magi
who had enquired about the child being born king of the Jews.

When Herod died, his territory was divided between his 3 sons
but for reasons I don't quite understand,
his son Archaleus, who oversaw Judea and the city of Jerusalem,
was removed from his position in 6 AD
and instead Rome took more direct control.
And here is the key thing for us:
Rome exercised that control through the Temple –
they gave the temple high priests and its influential families
significant administrative and financial powers.

Therefore in the years leading up to Jesus' ministry,
Jerusalem – and specifically the Temple –
was not just a *religious* centre
but it had become a powerful *political and economic* one as well,
and one far more aligned with the policies of Rome than it had ever been.
The temple legitimized the harsh imperial actions of Rome,
particularly in an era when wealthy landowners
were taking over small family-owned farms
and large numbers were being added to those
who hired themselves out as day-labourers
or were reduced to begging.

This is the Jerusalem that Jesus rode into;
one that was both the “beautiful city of our God” as the Psalmist puts it,
but also the one that was in bed with Rome.
This is the Temple in which Jesus makes such a scene:
the very dwelling place of God – the place of worship and sacrifice –
but also the one that through its collaboration with Rome,
was implementing harsh policies that were hurting the peasant class.
And Jesus' particular concern seemed to be
the legitimizing role that the Temple played.

Now I can't remember the film,
but I recall a movie scene that captures very well
this legitimacy that religious groups often provide
to the corrupt and powerful.
The movie concerned a secret group of wealthy senior politicians
and others in the 1950s,
who collaborated for their own corrupt ends.
This group had arranged a large formal function
that oozed power and money;
all the men were in black dinner suits
while the women were dressed in their finest
and just before they ate, a collared minister was called upon to say grace.
They all knew they were corrupt;
yet the minister offered religious legitimacy to their operations
by his very presence.

Jesus proclaimed a different path.
Entering Jerusalem on a donkey
Jesus lampoons the imperial processions of Rome
and their military might.
Staging a prophetic action in the Temple,
Jesus symbolically closes it down
to show that God's favour had been withdrawn.
Jesus, clearly acting in the line of Israel's prophets,
calls out a religious institution that had lost its soul
through collaborating with a violent empire.
The very institution that was to be a place of prayer for all,
the very place that was to stand up for the weak and powerless
was collaborating with, and legitimizing the actions of,
the Empire that was unjustly treating so much of the population.
And this wasn't what loyalty to God was about, protests Jesus.

A few thoughts suggest themselves for our reflection and action.
Firstly, this puts to bed the erroneous ideas
that faith has nothing to do with social justice;
or that social justice gets too much emphasis in the Uniting Church.
Indeed the prophets that Jesus emulates –
Amos, Isaiah, Micah –
all say how God *detests* the Temple worship and festivals
when they are done while injustice and exploitation abound.
Faith and work for justice belong together.
As I read in Borg and Crossan's book,

*“Since God is just and the world belongs to God, worship cannot be separated from justice... [rather] worship empowers the worshipper for a life of justice.”*¹

Secondly, we may well reflect on whether there are times when the Church collaborates with violent powers or legitimizes unjust policies. It is interesting to think of the whole 1600 years of Christendom, where the Church was almost unrecognizable from the State, and to think about horrors done by the Church in that period. I am reading another book for Heart and Mind – Brian McLaren’s *The Great Spiritual Migration*, and it reminds us of the sad legacy of a church overly aligned with a violent, colonizing Empire mentality.

Looking at the Church after Constantine, McLaren highlights the irony...

*“You would ponder how... a counter-imperial spiritual movement centred on a man who was tortured and killed by the Roman Empire became a pro-imperial institution that would, in the name of its founder and the Roman Emperors, torture and kill others.”*²

And perhaps more recently, we could think about the role the Church played in supporting the State in removing Aboriginal children from their families. It reminds us that when the Church is too close to the State, we can be blind to the injustices in which we are involved.

Yes we may enjoy metaphorically or otherwise waving palms on Palm Sunday and shouting Hosanna, but the real question is where do we stand when Jesus critiques, not the society but us, the Church and our relationships with, connections to and co-operation with the powers of our age? Those relationships may appear innocent but we better be sure for Christ is profoundly opposed to unjust actions done to poor and marginalised people by the powerful, especially where religious groups provide legitimization. We don’t want to be found collaborating with such agencies; in fact, with Christ, we want to be fighting against them.

¹ Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*. Harper One. Page 46

² Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*. Hodder. Page 82