

## He Went Out

Palm Sunday B, 3/25/24

We almost never know what we might remember, on any given day, from days gone by. We also rarely know, while we're living through them, what events or lessons or other experiences will stick with us, teaching us new things as new occasions might require. Sometimes, though, we do. One lesson that has stuck with me since my second year in graduate school, and that I expected would stick with me, is what a professor of Vedic and South Asian Religious Studies said one day in class. We were studying various epics from Eurasian religious traditions – works such as the *Mahabharata*, and in particular the *Bhagavad Gita* that is the most quoted part of it; Ireland's the Tain, and other cow-based epics through which peoples' visions of life and the world were conveyed. We were reading a passage from the *Mahabharata* in which Draupadi, the heroine of the epic, is speaking with her husband Yudishthira. He has lost everything, including his wife and his kingdom, in a dice game, and can't decide what to do. Suddenly our professor stopped and said, "Hmm. That's weird." "What do you mean?" one of us said. "I mean, come on. It's all weird." "No," she said, "I mean, I get that this is all new to you. What I meant was that this verb in Sanskrit is not usually translated this way. That's what's weird." Never mind the verb in question; it's what our professor said next that stuck with me. She said, "That's often the best way to get to the heart of these things. Find something that's weird or that doesn't fit, and then work on figuring out why it's there."

That lesson has served me well over the years. It works whether the text is a Sanskrit epic, a Sorokin story, a Hopkins poem, or a Gospel pericope. Look for something odd or out-of-place, and try to figure out how it got there. Heighten and sharpen

the bits that don't fit; don't smooth them down or glide on by as you go for the 'gist' of the thing. Strange words matter – the stranger, the better.

It works with the entire Bible, and with such near-biblical texts as 1<sup>st</sup> Enoch or the Infancy Gospels of Thomas and James. The latter tell the only stories we have of what Jesus and his mother were like when they were young. The classic biblical text case is Genesis 6:1-4. Look it up when you have a chance, and then look to see how far and fast commentators run away from the passage, ignore it, or try to turn it into something else. Another classic case is Mark 14:51-52; that one might come up later this week. Today's gospel story, Mark's version of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, has a minor case in point: Mark 11:11. It gives us our title. After riding into Jerusalem on a donkey colt, it says, Jesus "went to the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Hmm, I said as I read it, that's weird. Now why did he do that?

Why, that is, did Jesus look around the Temple but not talk to anyone. Why was he so late getting there? Why could he find no-one cheering "Hosanna!" as he walked through the city streets and went onto the Temple grounds? Was no-one expecting him – either to make him welcome or to make him a prisoner? If not, why not? After all, for all that he rode to town on a peasant's donkey and not a monarch's stallion, he did come "in the name of the Lord," and as the one who would bring (back) "the kingdom of our ancestor David" (Mark 11:9-10). Where did everybody go?

The stories of what happened to Jesus during his last days, which he spent in and near Jerusalem, are the heart of the four gospels that are themselves the heart of the New Testament. They're called Passion Narratives, since they concern what Jesus said and did before and during his Passion, or suffering, on the cross. Each has the same basic structure, but they differ in specifics, both in what Jesus does and in what he says.

Yet those differences are where, as the saying goes, the money is. They show us much that we need to know, even if they don't come right out and tell us what it is.

That's where the critical thinking part comes in – one of the ways we love God with all our mind. To love God with all our mind, we must think things through as mature people who aren't afraid to ask hard questions. We must never lazily assume that what we were told by some preacher or priest years ago is all there is to know, or necessarily correct. Think things through for yourselves, that is; don't just take them on faith. Faith without works is dead, as the Epistle of James reminds us. One of those works is learning whether or not what we have faith in is true – whether what we believe in and put our trust in is worthy of belief and trust. For this reason, faith never lets us rest with simply believing what we've been told, or with simply rejecting it. It bids us seek the truth, so that we shall find all that is true. It guides us to knock on the doors of perception and imagination, that both may be opened to us. The great heroes of faith did this, and still do. Each of them had to learn a new thing and think their own thoughts about it before their faith became real. Think of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Esther, Judith, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Magdala, whom Jesus loved, and Peter, and Paul. Each learned new things – often shatteringly new things – as an adult because God wanted them to and they let God's will be done. Consequently, each came to understand God and God's will quite differently than they had when they were young. Had they not done so, where would our faith be now? No, to love God with all our minds means to use all our minds to understand all we can, and to change if what we now know requires that we do so.

It also requires that we act on what we know. Among the things Draupadi and Yudishthira argue about in the *Mahabharata* is whether or not he should seek revenge on those who have wronged them. He argues no; the wicked will get theirs in the end, and far be it from me to join them, lest I get mine. She argues yes: a person must

act to preserve what is theirs and to increase it. Who does not act must endure the acts of others. She says, at one point, “The one who believes that everything...is fate and the one who professes that it is chance are both apostate; it is the spirit to act that is extolled.”<sup>1</sup> That is, who acts, who does what they know they must, is worthy of praise. If you know what to do, then do it. Don’t wait for others, God, the universe, or whatever to do it for you. Knowledge without works is as dead as faith without works; don’t let either happen to you.

Speaking of action: Mark was the first one to write a gospel down, so far as we know. His is the only gospel in which Jesus goes to the Temple, has a look round, finds no-one to talk to, and then leaves town. Why did Mark put that detail in – and why did the gospel writers who came after him leave it out? Good question.

By comparison: in Matthew, when Jesus gets to the Temple, it isn’t late at all. It’s during business hours. Furious that people are doing business in His Father’s house, Jesus overturns the moneychangers’ tables and drives out the livestock being sold there for sacrifice. In Luke’s gospel, he does the same thing, although he first weeps over Jerusalem because of all the misery that he knows will come upon that city in years to come. In John’s gospel, Jesus does none of these things when he gets to Jerusalem this time. In John, Jesus whips the moneychangers in chapter 2, just after turning water into wine the start of his public ministry. His entry into the city this time is but a footnote to the story of how He Raised Lazarus. His having done that is why people came out to see him. It was only after ‘he was glorified’ that his disciples remembered why what happened was supposed to have happened, and took to remembering it that way, also. That sort of thing happened a lot in the writing of the gospels and as early Christians taught themselves to read the Hebrew Bible as though it prefigured Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. But that’s a tale for another time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mahabharata* 3(31)33:11-13, “The Book of the Forest,” tr./ed. J.A.B. van Buitenen. Chicago, 1975/(1981) 284.

In Mark's gospel, after riding on that donkey from Bethany to Jerusalem that first day, Jesus for the next few days goes back and forth between the two. He leaves that first day, after having gotten in late and finding no-one at the Temple to talk to, or at least at. The next day, he gets in earlier, during business hours, and does what Matthew and Luke also report him doing: driving the moneychangers and animal sellers out. He leaves for Bethany after that's done, as well. Matthew and Luke elide two days together. Mark does not. This reminds me that it was Jesus's threat to the Temple's religious and economic system, and to the relative peace it bought the Roman occupiers so long as they didn't mess with it, that turned Jerusalem's leaders against him.

It's in that light that we can appreciate what it means that the only night Jesus ever spends in Jerusalem itself is the night before he dies. He never had a home there; he never felt at home there. He only rented that Upper Room in town on his last night so that he could have one last Passover meal with his closest followers, and be easy to find for those who wanted him dead.

Jesus's ability to walk freely about Jerusalem, and to come and go from city and Temple as he pleased, reminds us just how few those were who wanted to hurt him, and how they bided their time. They knew, as the gospels each tell us, how a good portion of the people admired him. Many had laid their cloaks before him as he rode in, and no-one did anything to them or to him because of it. None of those people would look kindly on the powers that be putting the strong arm of the law on such a person, especially when that law was barely moral on its best days. That's why Jesus could leave quietly, late in the evening, on the day he rode to town to the shouts of Hosannas. The people loved him, and his enemies didn't know yet what to do. So he went out. But don't worry, Jerusalem. He'll be back tomorrow. He still has plenty to do. *Amen.*