

## **“Jesus’ Claim and Our Acclaim”** Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

You are in a small town in Saskatchewan where you grew up, standing **outside the E & L Café** on the sidewalk, one morning, chatting with a few friends. Four of five cars are parked out front, belonging to people inside having a cup of coffee. Someone you don’t recognize comes up and gets into one of the cars. The keys are in it -- after all everybody knows everybody here -- he starts the engine, and shifts into reverse. Two of three of you yell out, **“Hey, is that your car? I don’t think so! Wait a minute! Where are you going?”** And **as the stranger drives off, you hurry inside to warn the owner his car has just been driven away.**

**That’s the situation** a few people find themselves in one morning **in the village of Bethphage**, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, when Jesus sent two of his disciples for an animal he wanted on which to take a ride. The two seem to know exactly which animal they want and have gone right to work, when they hear, **“What are you doing, untying the colt?”** But they have their answer ready. **“The Lord needs it.”** “Oh, Okay?!” (Mk. 11:5-6a).

**How did Jesus get away with that?** Remember that, in Mark’s account, he’d never been to Jerusalem before. **Had he set it up ahead of time? Or was it a miracle of foreknowledge, an act of divine prescience?** In the **latter** case, he would have had to have known just where the animal he wanted was located, and just the right words that would allow perfect strangers to make off with someone else’s animal. In the **former** case, he would have had to have set it all up ahead of time, and arranged for some magic words to have been some prearranged signal.

Growing up with this story, I always assumed Jesus who knew what was in people’s hearts, who calmed the storm, and who raised the dead, would’ve had no trouble knowing where his Palm Sunday ride was coming from and how to spring it loose. I never thought anything else until I came across and read C. S. Lewis’ friend’s, **Dorothy L. Sayers,**’ dramatic and down-to-earth, wartime radio presentation of Jesus, *The Man Born to Be King* (1945). There, Jesus has lined up his ride ahead of time, password and all. What else would you expect from the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey?

In the gospel story as Mark tells it, Jesus and his party have just left Jericho and reached the brow of the Mount of Olives, across the last valley from

Jerusalem. There'd been **no opportunity for pre-arrangement**; all that intrigue and collusion must be supplied from outside the narrative. Besides, if it was set up ahead of time, why would Mark tell the story in such detail? Over half of today's story is given to these arrangements. On the other hand, isn't it a little far-fetched to suppose that the regulars at the E & L would let someone make off with their friend's car just because he said, "The Lord needs it, and will send it right back?" Yeah, right! Surely that suggests some **code words fixed ahead of time**.

In any case, devotee of the biblical text as text as I am, I'm inclined to read the story without the in-between-the lines embellishments called for in the twenty-first century. The details of the story are those the Holy Spirit and the gospel writer chose. Whether by pre-arrangement or pre-knowing Jesus wanted a colt, one that had never been ridden, and he obtained it by the words, "The Lord needs it." Because Jesus wanted just these arrangements, we'll do well to read them for what they tell us about himself and his expectations as he arrives.

The story has two centres: the first speaks of **Jesus' arrangements**, and the second of **his entry** into the city. The first speaks about **who Jesus is** and what he expects; the second about **what faithful people do**. Call these two parts **the rider and the ride**, or **Jesus' claim and our acclaim**.

### 1. **Jesus' Claim** (Mk. 11:1-6).

By the arrangements Jesus makes, **he tacitly claims to be God's messianic leader**, the expected king, albeit a different, more humble one that most folks would have thought.

**Jesus has walked everywhere since the beginning of his ministry**. He and the Twelve are now just outside Jerusalem. They have come about 200 kilometres south from the site of the Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-8), and the Herod's magnificent Temple is actually within view across the valley. He is so close that, later in the week, they go back and forth to spend the night in Bethany, perhaps in the vicinity of his friends' – Mary's, Martha's and Lazarus' -- home. Later, on the night of his arrest, they stroll from the Upper Room in Jerusalem to the base of the Mount of Olives. **Why does he now, suddenly, decide to take a ride?**

**To ride is to claim a dignity and station.** Donkey, or horse, are equally suitable for a king. In another gospel, Matthew quotes the prophetic oracle that says **the messianic king will arrive, riding a donkey's "colt, the foal of a donkey"** (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:4-5). Mark doesn't quote it, though he may have it in mind. Certainly, **Jesus is a king**. He sends for **a colt on which no one has ever sat** (Mk. 11:2). It is an old and familiar expectation of the gods and their guardians that they receive only the best: the sacrificial animal has to be perfect, and the priestly servants healthy and whole. If you offer the king a valuable colt, it should be unbroken, unused, so that the royal stables might train it to their own order and discipline. So, for his mount, Jesus sends for a colt on which no one has ever so much as sat.

Not only so, but, in the event, the one who calmed the storm has **the force to subdue the animal to its first rider**, and to ride it through the helter-skelter of a noisy crowd, starts and upstarts everywhere, shouts ahead and cries behind. Don't we, too, then ask, **"What manner of man is this?"** (Mk. 4:41, KJV). The password gives us the answer: **this man is "the Lord."** Although by now familiar to us, these are strong words, for the word from the Greek word **"kurios"** which we commonly translate as **"lord"** is everywhere used in the Bible for Israel's God, as well as during the New Testament times, for the Romans' Caesar. That's who approaches the city, coming as the designated leader, Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Yet see **how subtle, how allusive it all is**. When you know the story you can see it. But there, at the gates, Jesus makes no bold assertions, gives no speeches, lofts no declarations – rather these are symbolic actions known only to those closest to him. **This is ever the way Jesus Christ comes: not with force**, not overriding our wills, not blowing us away in a blast of irrefutable logic or divine prerogative. The donkey submits to the rider; it is people who crucify.

**And he comes to be part of our daily life, to do us good.** Here I rely on another antecedent biblical text, taken from the last pages of Genesis, because it also contains a reference to **a colt that is tied**. "Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in the blood of grapes" (Gen. 49:11). This text is undoubtedly messianic, being part of a poem composed upon the patriarch, Jacob's deathbed, to offer predictions for his twelve sons.

For his fourth son, **Judah**, through whose line we know the Messiah ultimately came, Jacob predicts violence and bloodshed. Judah “washes his garments in the blood of grapes” Jacob says, in an extravagant metaphor for war and conquest. Judah, (that is, the Messiah who springs from him) will be so successful in war that Jacob says, **he will bind “his foal to a vine.”** With such predictions, it’s no surprise, therefore, that God’s people expected the Messiah would **rule with “a rod of iron”** (Ps. 2:9a), not least many centuries later in the days of the imperial Roman tyrant, Caesar Augustus.

But when the Messiah actually arrives and has a colt untied for him, it is **not tethered to the vine, but at a door, ready for use.** It is not out in the field where the blood of the grape flows, but **“outside in the street”** (Mk. 11:4). It is not where soldiers clash, but where ordinary bystanders look after one another’s property. Jesus is the one who went to parties with ordinary, rough and tumble tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:10-11; 11:19; Lk. 19:7). He belongs to daily life, to social concourse, to clusters of people having morning coffee together. When the messianic king finally rides the donkey, he comes to bring salvation, to reach out to our common life and to make it new. On that first Palm Sunday, the time was close when **he would wash his robe in the blood of the grape**, but when it happened, it would be **his own blood that was spilled**, willingly, freely shed for the life of the world.

And then **he comes asking for what we have that he needs**, for that is the word that releases the colt at the door: **“The Lord needs it.”** The king has the right to **co-opt people or things** – isn’t that the jargon now? -- for public service; the technical term is **“to impress.”** Like ordinary citizens were impressed or press-ganged into **the British Navy** during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth century, usually by force and without notice, **Jesus impressed the colt.** (You can take that in more ways than one, starting with what the colt felt when this first most gentle of riders slipped on to his back. Following established royal practice, Jesus impressed the colt into his service.

**“The Lord needs it.”** This is always Christ’s claim. We have what he needs and, for the most part, he has only what we have. Some of you have allowed yourselves to be pressed into helping the homeless, the street people in our Tuesday evening Downtown Street Ministry. To serve as an elder in this congregation is to be impressed into Christ’s service, and I thank God for every faithful and devoted act by our elders. Several have also taken on additional responsibilities, like our Treasurer and Envelope Secretary.

Several others render pastoral service to people in their districts. Others faithfully serve on our Pastoral Care Team which visits people weekly in long term care facilities and in the hospital. To be a staff person, or a volunteer, to be called by Christ to serve on a Ministry Team in our church, in any one of its ministries and missions, to be a Kid Connect or Youth Connect leader, to sing in the Praise Team or the Choir is to hear the claim, **“The Lord needs it.”**

Still the Lord makes his claim on everyone here today. He claims your time: for prayer, for work, for learning, for worship. He claims your money: it’s all he has to spend. Some of you will hear that there are short term mission opportunities for adults as well as young people, for doctors, accountants, teachers and builders. **“The Lord needs it.”**

Giving Jesus Christ what he needs will not impoverish us. **“The Lord needs it, and he will send it back here immediately”** (Mk. 11:3b). In this regard, I’m always reminded of **Marge Henry’s** great discovery of the spiritual benefit and truth of the Scripture, “Cast your bread upon the waters and it will return back to you” (Eccles. 11:1). Of course, your time and money do not come back, the way a colt returns to its tether. But the words do mean that to give what Christ needs does not, ultimately deprive us. It enriches us. When I was in Korea last April on a moderatorial visit, I was on several occasions the recipient of some people’s **“anonymous devotion”** to God. It blessed me. But I expect it also blessed those who practice it. I grew up on the slogan, “You cannot out give God,” and I guess I still believe it. All that you do and give comes back in one way or another: in the satisfying knowledge that Christ’s kingship goes forward, in the mystery that tithing and sacrificial giving does not impoverish you, in the richness of friendship and learning, and in God’s inner and final commendation, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

These are the claims that Christ makes as he draws near.

## 2. **The People’s and Our Acclaim** (Mk. 11:7-10).

Just as the arrangements in today’s story tell us **what Jesus Christ asks of us**, so the events which transpired as the ride proceeded, show us **what we can give**. I recall here that, in the arrangements, Jesus makes his claim in an understated, indirect manner, while **the people’s response is open and full**. Jesus claim is **subtle and almost private**. You would’ve had to know about

the arrangements to grasp it. Perhaps only the disciples would have at first been aware of it. Mark now tells us, perhaps drawing on Peter's own testimony, so that we might see what they saw. But then: **the private claim is followed by the public acclaim.**

The disciples put their cloaks upon the colt – making **an impromptu throne** as **Morna Hooker** puts it – and Jesus got on (Mk. 11:7).

**Our clothing is personal**; it becomes part of our identity. I know that sometimes dress is conventional, but even then, we identify ourselves with that convention, the way students who insist on wearing ripped jeans say something about themselves and their group. Besides, most of us have an individual style of dress. You will know that I have an affinity for blazers. I like the preppy look. Someone else will say, “She would never wear a dress like that” or “I’ve never seen him with that kind of shirt.” With our favourite garments, clothes almost become a personal statement.

To give them to someone else is to give away a part of ourselves. If you ever lost a favourite shirt or tie or blouse while travelling, say perhaps you left it in the motel, you’ll know what I am saying. Imagine someone you don’t know having found and wearing your favourite things! It follows that to allow our clothes to be sat on, or even walked on is **an act of symbolic submission**. A familiar legend tells us that **Sir Walter Raleigh** once laid down his coat on muddy ground so that Queen Elizabeth I would not dirty her feet. He was a courtier; she was the queen. It was the right thing to do.

Thus it is that **the acclaim we first make is to accept Christ’s claims**, to submit to his kingship, to acknowledge him as our Lord. The image is strong, even scandalous: **he and the his donkey will ride on our clothes**. We may well draw back. A favourite cartoon in my collection shows a big man in a big car approaching one of those triangular yellow signs that says, **“Yield.”** His face is grim with resentment, and his wife, on the seat beside him, says to him, **“That really gets you, doesn’t it?”** Perhaps it does. But if we would truly be Christians, if we would truly be the church, this is where we begin. We are the courtiers; he is the king. We say, “O Christ, I give myself to you.” Today is the start of Holy Week; within days, Jesus will be in Gethsemane, where we hear his prayer, “Not my will but thine be done.” We cannot pray and say any less.

Then, there are also the **“leafy branches”** which only John’s Gospel tells us are “branches of palm trees” (Jn. 12:13a), which the people tear from the trees in the fields and beside the road and wave. And, finally, **there are those shouts of acclamation**: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom ...!” (Mk. 11:9-10). This, also, we do. We go public with our loyalty.

**But is Jerusalem’s praise sincere and true?** Preachers have often liked to say it was superficial or only momentary, for within five days, the crowd was calling for Jesus’ death. Of what use is the praise of a fickle mob? But this is not my view, because Mark does not use his favourite word, **“crowd”** (the English for the Greek word, “ochlos”), here. It’s everywhere in the gospel, almost a code word for hostility; it is **the “crowd” who seized Jesus** in the garden, and **who cried for his murder at the trial** (Mk. 14:43; 15:8). But here the language is different, and we hear of **“those who went ahead and who followed”** (Mk. 11:9). I believe these are not the people who crucified him, but instead his loyal followers old and new, who gathered around him in a loving display of enthusiasm and loyalty.

**That is who we are, and that is what we do, here at worship.** Here we are, again this Palm Sunday morning, we who gather around the Messiah in loving loyalty – we praise and adore him.

All glory, laud and honour to Thee Redeemer, King,  
 To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!  
 Thou didst accept their praises, accept the praise we bring,  
 Who in all good delightest, thou good and gracious King.

**It is also still who we are when we leave.** We go public, once again, with our loyalty to Christ the King out there too.

Once, long ago, I was in a car traveling to hold a service in some church. We came upon a car pulled over with a flat tire; there was a woman standing behind the open trunk of the car, on the side of the road. We seemed to hear the voice of the One who said, “The Lord needs it,” and so we pulled over and changed the tire. She was effusive with her thanks and one of my partners said, “Just let this renew your faith in human nature.” I didn’t say anything, but I should have piped in, **“We’re Christians.”** We do these things because “the Lord needs it.”

And now, remember, where it all started, there at the E & L Café, with your friends. You hear the claim, “**The Lord needs it.**” Don’t stop now. Be a bystander no longer. Join the followers of the Lord crowding lovingly around Him with words of acclaim, “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Amen

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