

March 25, 2018 - From the Sidelines

Mark 11:1-11

It's hot here today. I'm just sitting and the sweat is dripping off my brow. I wish the sun would go under a cloud. It's not usually this hot in the springtime in Jerusalem. I should know, I come here every year with my family, for Passover. It's a long journey from Galilee, nearly two weeks on foot, but my husband has family here so every year we arrive early to visit before the celebrations begin.

Oh... we haven't met before, have we? My name is Sarah. I'm waiting here by the East Gate for my brother, Aaron, and his family. Aaron lives in Jericho. It's a much shorter journey, only a day or two, but they have to travel some pretty rough terrain. I hope they get here before dark.

I'm not usually sitting here at this time in the week. Normally on the Sunday before Passover, my family and I head over to the west side of town. We go to watch the parade. That's the day that the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, arrives in town followed by rows and rows of horses and soldiers. What a show of power: cavalry, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. It's pretty impressive!

There are always lots of people on the sidelines. Some are cheering on the soldiers, shouting loudly over the sound of marching feet, the clinking of metal

bridles and the beating of drums. Others watch silently: some curious, some awed, some resentful, some downright angry.

It's an impressive sight, but it's frightening too. My youngest daughter burst out in tears last year – scared by the horses and the noise. I too felt fear, fear for my family, our land and our possessions. We have all felt the effect of the brutal greed of our oppressors, especially those of us who are peasants. Since the Romans came with their heavy taxes, it seems like the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Just last year I watched as one of our neighbours lost his land because he couldn't keep up the payments on his loan. It's hard to know what to do as the soldiers march by. Do you cheer or do you cry?

Oh look, there's something happening at the gate! I was so busy talking to you I nearly missed it. A crowd of people have gathered! There's a man coming through the gate riding a... wait a minute what is he riding... he's riding a colt, a baby donkey. He's sitting on some cloaks on the back of this colt and his feet are practically dragging on the ground. He looks a little ridiculous, actually.

But what's even stranger is that the people around him are spreading their cloaks and some branches on the road in front of him. And they are shouting. What are they shouting? They are just getting close enough for me to make out the words, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" They are shouting, "Save us, we pray! Save us, we pray! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God! Blessed is the coming reign of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!"

Everyone around him is shouting these words. It's like they think this man is a king, a king like our ancestor, David. Who is he, that they are calling him a king? Don't they know how dangerous that is? This city is full of Roman centurions. A soldier may hear them and tell Pontius Pilate what they are saying. Of course, everyone knows that the chief priests and the scribes are in cahoots with the Romans; maybe one of them is nearby!

There are so many people around this man that I can't get a good look at him. Just a minute while I go a little closer. Wow this place is packed. It's hard to get through the crowd. There he is! Now, if he would just turn my way... yes! Ahh I know that face. I've seen him before. He came to our village just a few months ago. His name is Jesus and he is from Nazareth.

Jesus is one of those itinerant preachers, travelling from town to town sharing the good news. But I remember him because he is different than the others. There is a presence about him that is holy. He has this incredible ability to heal the sick and those who are blind or unable to walk. I even watched, one day, as he removed a demon from a young man. It is as if the healing love of God flows through his body and into the bodies, minds and hearts of those around him.

But even more amazing than his gift of healing, is his ability to preach. When he opens his mouth it is mesmerizing. He talks about the coming reign of God, a time of peace and justice when all oppressors will be gone and everyone will be treated as equals. And he uses stories to explain what that time will be like and

how each one of us has to do our part to make it happen. I want to believe him. I want to believe that is possible to make a difference in the world.

When he came to our part of Galilee, a few of the people in my village decided to leave their families and follow him. I thought about it too, but my husband, Jacob, pointed out that we had too much to lose... at least we still had a bit of land and a house to our name. I wonder what would have happened if I had left to follow Jesus? Would I have been able to make a difference in the lives of the people of Galilee and Judea? Would I be spreading my cloak on the ground or laying down leafy branches instead of standing on the sidelines? Would I be shouting "Hosanna, Hosanna," instead of standing here talking to you?

I'm kind of glad that I ended up on this side of the city this year. Jesus' parade was a lot smaller and quieter than the one the Roman's put on, but it feels like this parade was staged just for me. I needed this reminder that bigger is not always better, that God's kingdom is about peace and justice not war and greed, that salvation is healing through love. I needed this reminder that we are all called to be part of Jesus' ministry, to make his vision a reality.

Yes, Jesus looks ridiculous on that colt, but knowing him, I think that is the point. He always preaches about turning the world upside down and a king on a colt is certainly an upside-down kind of image. I can't wait to see what Jesus is going to do next. This could be a very different Passover week. Aaron better get here quick because I have to get back to Jacob to tell him the news: Jesus' parade has arrived in Jerusalem!