

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a carefully planned event. He gives detailed instructions to his disciples to prepare for his procession into the city. That procession recalls two previous events in Israel's history. The first is the prophecy of Zechariah which tells the people to rejoice for their king will come to them, triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey, a king who will command peace to the nations. The second event is a triumphal military entry when the Jewish leader Simon Maccabeus entered the city accompanied by people with palm branches and singing songs of praise following their victory against the Greek Empire which secured independence for Israel in the year 141BC.

Jesus' demonstration may well have had an element of satire or mockery against military liberators and conquerors. On the other side of the city Pontius Pilate would be marching in from the coast with his legions and armoury to shore up the Roman garrison and ensure good order during the tense days of the Passover celebration.

Jesus certainly didn't come to Jerusalem as a military liberator, as many expected the Messiah to be. He does not storm the Roman garrison or Herod's palace. Instead, he goes to the temple to survey it as our reading states. The following day he returns and carries out another planned symbolic action. He effectively shuts the temple down, prevents its normal functioning. He is not condemning the

business, the buying and selling, the sacrificing – that was all perfectly legitimate temple practice. What he is demonstrating is that God is a God of justice. And when worship substitutes for justice, when the temple system collaborates with the injustice of the conquerors, then God rejects the temple. God always rejects religion that is used to support violence and injustice.

In the violence of the Romans, in the self-serving hypocrisy of the religious elites, in the fury of the crowd that shouted, ‘Crucify him,’ we find the characters that are represented in every era of human history, including, sadly, still today. Jesus’ death on the cross is a sign of God’s judgement on those people. God identifies with the sacrificial victim, with Jesus who has allowed himself to be handed over to death. God is with Jesus in his suffering and death on that cross.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the words, ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ And as Jesus’ life ends, his status is reaffirmed, but from a most unlikely source. A Roman centurion says, ‘Truly, this man was the Son of God.’ He is the first human being in the Gospel to call Jesus Son of God. Neither Jesus himself nor his followers called him by that title in Mark’s account. But here it comes from the lips of a representative of the regime that killed Jesus. In Roman theology, the Son of God was Caesar, the emperor. He was also called the Lord, the Saviour of the world, the bringer of peace on earth. But this Roman officer

at the cross declares that the tortured, crucified Jew is the real Son of God. To say this is to say that Caesar is not. In this remarkable concluding scene Mark gives us an image of the Roman Empire testifying against itself.

Empires, domination systems, aggression, along with hatred, bigotry, racism, xenophobia, and collaboration or complicity with such forces is always to live in opposition to God. It is godlessness of the first order. It is real sin, systemic sin. It is such forces that Jesus confronted in life and death. On that cross Jesus demonstrated God's judgement on them most vividly.

Just thinking about all this can leave us quite drained. But that has to be a positive experience. We are being 'divinely drained.' Paul tells us that Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. As followers of Jesus, we too are called to empty ourselves, to be willing sacrifices of empathy with the suffering of our loving Saviour. This will help us to empathize with all this world's innocent victims, help us to pour out the ointment of love on weary heads and feet, to love people better for the sake of Jesus. It is often costly. But in this way we truly follow the Jesus way, the way of the one who emptied himself in love for the world. In following his way, we discover the way to true humanity, to joy, to freedom, to life as God wishes us to live it.