

PALM SUNDAY PARADE MIXED IN DETAILS

Jesus' parade into Jerusalem less than a week before he met his end is told in all four of the gospels. While they all agree on the basic outline of events, their details are impossible to harmonize.

Here's the rough sequence of events: Jesus has joined a troop; of pilgrims who are going to the capital for the Passover celebration. As they come through the suburbs, his men commandeer a donkey.

When Jesus rides into town, the crowds cheer him on. They pave the road with their coats and with branches lopped off nearby trees.

As soon as he arrives at the temple, Jesus charges into the outer courts and tries to force out the banking and livestock concessions. Which doesn't sit well with the authorities, of course. So they hatch a plot to eliminate him.

The Christian documents are agreed on that much. But the details are something else.

Matthew 21 gives the impression that Jesus' disciples found two animals for him to ride, a donkey and her colt. If taken literally, his parade would have looked like a circus act!

After doing his number in the temple, according to Matthew, Jesus spends the night at Bethany. The next morning on the walk back into town he curses a fig tree which failed to supply any fruit for breakfast.

Mark 11 offers a few different details. There's no question about the number of donkeys. One is enough. But in this account it is an unbroken colt which has never been ridden. If taken literally, Jesus' ride would have put a rodeo cowboy to shame!

Now about that incident in the temple. Was it the same day as the parade, as Matthew suggests? Or was it the next day?

For Mark insists that Jesus came to the temple, looked around, and then retired to Bethany because it was late. In his record the fig tree trick comes before the disruption of the temple, both on the day after the parade.

Luke 19 eliminates some of the chronological difficulties. According to his account, Jesus rides into town on one animal.

He stops the parade long enough to cry over the city. Then he charges into the temple and starts to throw out the merchants.

There's no mention of any overnight stay in the suburbs, and no mention of the fig tree incident. So it's hard to say exactly when the incidents take place.

John 12 offers the shortest account. According to it, Jesus has been visiting his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the town of Bethany. (In the previous chapter Lazarus had been raised from the dead by Jesus, an event mentioned only in this gospel.)

John's is the account which specifies that the pilgrims wave palm branches while they cheer Jesus, who has found donkey to ride. (That's where the Christian observance of "Palm Sunday" gets its name.)

How about the incident in the temple? It's not even mentioned. But there's an almost identical event in John 2, at the very beginning of Jesus' career.

The upshot of it all is that it's next to impossible to reconstruct a clear sequence of events. Apparently each of the biblical authors used a pick-an-choose method. And each account accents a different bias.

But for each writer this event marks the beginning of the week which ended in Jesus' ignominious execution. They all want to suggest that there is something godly, even royal, about his death by crucifixion.

So his entrance via a donkey is intended to be something of a parable. The evangelists had found words in the Jewish scriptures about Jerusalem's king arriving "humble and riding on an ass."

To their way of thinking those words were filled up with new meaning when Jesus arrived on a donkey. Matthew and John even quote the appropriate passage from Zechariah 9:9.

The result is a unique blend of historical detail and theological interpretation. And that makes for some interesting insights for readers who take the trouble to sort out the details.