Our Sunday Readings

An Earthshaking Ascent

**MATTHEW 21:1-11**

*Reading closely*

1. What might the disciples have thought as they carried out Jesus’ instructions?
2. How does the quotation from Zephaniah make Jesus seem?
3. How do you imagine the people acting?
4. What expectations do you think people had of Jesus?
5. How does the city react?
6. Who would have been disturbed by the way Jesus entered Jerusalem?
7. What do the crowds call Jesus?
8. How well do people seem to understand Jesus?

*Living the word*

9. When have you welcomed Jesus?
10. When has Jesus *shaken* or unnerved you?
11. When do we use the word *hosanna*? Why do you think we use the word in this way?

**MATTHEW 21:1-11**

*Symbolic arrival*

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem he knows that his actions will provoke those in authority to crucify him. Crucifixion was Rome’s way of warning people not to cause trouble. Jesus disregards the danger and enters the Roman-occupied sacred city in a deliberately symbolic way.

- By riding a donkey Jesus evokes a prophesy in which a Jewish king liberates God’s people and establishes peace (Zephaniah 9:9-10)
- The word *hosanna* means the LORD saves. Palm branches were used in Jewish celebrations of nationhood. (See Psalm 118:19-27.) The use of both would have antagonized Rome.

*Shaking the city*

The manner of Jesus’ entry into the city threatens those in power. Jerusalem’s Jewish and Roman leaders fear that Jesus has come to violently overthrow the political establishment. They thus orchestrate his crucifixion. The long-awaited descendant of King David enters David’s city, but the throne he will ascend is the cross.

Soon after Jesus was born, magi visited Jerusalem in search of the *newborn king*. Their arrival shook the inhabitants and leadership of Jerusalem (2:3). Jerusalem is again shaken when the adult king enters the city (21:10). Although the city ultimately rejects its king, people do accept Jesus, including those of other nations. The magi’s arrival foreshadowed the acceptance of Jesus by non-Jews.
MATTHEW 27:45-56
Reading closely
1. How do the supernatural events affect your impression of Jesus’ crucifixion?
2. Why do you think Jesus shouted, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
3. How do people seem to treat Jesus?
4. What might the centurion and other soldiers have thought of Jesus?
5. What do you think it was like for the soldiers to experience their sudden change of heart?
6. What all might the women have thought and felt during all of this?
7. Where are Jesus’ male disciples?

Living the word
8. How might Jesus have acted differently during his Passion?
9. What do you think helped Jesus to persevere?
10. Through what must you persevere?
11. How does the story of Jesus’ Passion and death affect you?

MATTHEW 27:45-56
Matthew’s account of Jesus’ death is filled with supernatural signs. These signs indicate that a new era of salvation has come. They include...
• an eclipse
• the tearing of the cloth that separated the holiest part of the Jerusalem temple from the outer room
• an earthquake (only in this Gospel); another earthquake will signal the arrival of an angel at the empty tomb (28:2)
• holy people rising from the dead (only in this Gospel)

Jesus’ death affects all people and the whole of creation itself. As creation declares the importance of Jesus’ death, so do the soldiers (v.54).

Jesus’ death seems like a shameful defeat, but ultimately it shakes up the whole world. Jesus’ faith-filled persistence and gentleness in the face of rejection and violence are more powerful than the forces that oppose him.

JUDAS, THE BETRAYER
Thirty pieces of silver is a very small amount of money (26:14f). Judas is portrayed as caring so much about money that he’ll betray his own master for a small amount of it. Moreover, the amount is the equivalent to that paid to the owner of a slave who was accidentally killed (Exodus 21:32).

The Gospels of Matthew and John portray Judas as greedy, but this may be an attempt to explain why he betrayed his master. Greed might not be the whole story.

Judas might have become increasingly disturbed by the full significance of all that Jesus was saying and doing. In unmistakable ways Jesus was replacing Judaism with himself. This radical reorientation of faith may have been too much for Judas to accept.

Matthew records that Judas hanged himself (27:5). The Book of Acts details how he died after somehow stumbling (Acts 1:18). Both are unhappy endings, but in Matthew Judas shows regret: he tries to give the money back (27:3-4).

JUDAS, THE BETRAYER
1. Why do you think Judas betrayed Jesus?
2. How have you betrayed Jesus?
3. In what ways have you repented?

PRAYER
adapted from the Prayers for Palm Sunday
Almighty, ever-living God, you have given us Jesus Christ our Savior as a model of humility, gentleness and self-giving love. He fulfilled your will by becoming human and giving his life on the cross. Through his life, death, and resurrection, all creation has been freed from sin and death. Guide our minds by his truth, and strengthen our lives by the example of his death, that we may live in union with you in the kingdom of your promise. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.