



## Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

In our reading in Mark today we read of Jesus the Messiah going to Jerusalem. We know that going to Jerusalem was going to change things, not just for Jesus but for his disciples and even today it has the power to change us. Jerusalem was going to reveal what we have been referring to as the Messianic secret. Jesus in going to Jerusalem, wanted people to know for sure that he was the Messiah after all. Christmas Eve 1999 the BBC reported:

Israel is beefing up its mental health services as it prepares for an outbreak of Jerusalem Syndrome, a condition which convinces thousands of tourists they are Jesus or another biblical figure. It has been estimated about 40,000 people will suffer biblical delusions during their Christmas visit to the Holy Land. Every year thousands of tourists become so affected by the Holy City's powerful religious icons they are overwhelmed by delusions that they are the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, or one of his disciples. But 1999 has seen a 100% increase in cases, and experts fear the Book of Revelations' prediction of Jesus' reign in the "second millennium" could spark widespread dementia and confusion. The syndrome affects around one per cent of visitors - and with four million expected to arrive in Jerusalem over the millennium, 40,000 could be affected. The most frequent sufferers are British and American visitors. Helen Davis, from the British-Israeli Public Affairs Centre, said: "It can be a major shift in personality leading people to think they are Jesus, or Moses or King David. Some of these characters can be seen around the city. "Sometimes they are quite harmless, or usually quite harmless, but sometimes they need serious treatment." She added: "The psychiatric treatment in Jerusalem has been beefed up for the millennium simply because of the number of pilgrims who will be coming during the millennium year."

The syndrome was identified in 1982 by the director of Jerusalem's municipal psychiatric hospital, Dr Yair Bar-El. Most of those who experience it do so for just a short period, with no need of treatment, but some require psychiatric help. Sufferers become obsessed with cleanliness, they often begin wearing hotel bedding as imitation biblical garb and start prophesising. Many have delusions that they are Jesus, Joseph or Mary. Jerusalem is a target city, because of the effect its powerful imagery has on the minds of seriously religious people. When they arrive, they are overwhelmed and become mentally disorientated. Just being in the Holy Land tips them over the edge. But what happens if the real Messiah puts in an appearance? It would be highly likely he would be deemed insane. For the authorities this is a pressing dilemma, known as the Jerusalem Question. Ms Davis said: "The police tend to be rather cynical and deal with day to day problems rather than religious issues...but that [a true prophet] would be a policing issue of major proportions. Millions believe it, who knows?"

One of the most long-standing case studies is Californian Ernest Moch. He is now known as Elijah and is convinced that he is a reincarnation of the original Prophet Elijah from the Bible. He says God called him to this city - and to his destiny here in Jerusalem. In an interview with the BBC earlier this year Dr Bar El revealed he had treated several Jesus Christs, a Virgin Mary or two, and Samson. The Holy City, he said, attracts the vulnerable. "Jerusalem is like a magnet that attracts people, some of them mentally ill, some of them with deep religious convictions; strange, rare persons", he said. "Completely sane people arrive here as normal tourists and here they develop a specific type of Jerusalem Syndrome. "They come here with an ideal and unconscious image of the holy places in Jerusalem, and when they see the real holy places they can't cope. They develop this psychotic reaction to build a bridge between these different images of Jerusalem", he added. I wonder if there are any here this morning who might be suffering from the Jerusalem Syndrome or perhaps another condition sometimes known as a Messiah complex? As we look at this reading this morning we are almost tempted to ask, "Would the real Messiah please stand up!" What do I mean by that? Well to understand fully what was about to happen we need to backtrack slightly. Let me explain. Jesus has just told his followers, and we are not specifically referring to the disciples here,; <sup>29</sup>"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup> will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last first." This was an amazing thing to hear.

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Jesus telling people that what they are prepared to give up for him, they will receive far more of not just in this life but also in the life to come. <sup>32</sup>They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Some of those who heard him say things were amazed but there was also a proportion of those who only heard the bit about persecution and this caused them fear.

Very often we tend to believe that for us living in N. Ireland there is little or no problem with the whole issue of persecution and so we willingly sign up for the Christian way of life. The problem comes when we do face a small amount of persecution - sometimes in school or college, sometimes in our employment, we recoil from it and almost dive for our contracts to see exactly where this is mentioned. In countries like China, Vietnam and Columbia those who follow Christ are more than aware of the dangers that face them when they confess the name of Christ. It doesn't mean they are not afraid, it just means they fully understand what Jesus did for them. I cannot help but wonder as we read this passage where do we see ourselves in this picture? As we follow after Jesus, are we still astonished with Jesus or are we so afraid with the prospect of following Him that we lag behind or even turn around and head home. What a wonderful picture as we start a new church year.

They were like us on their way somewhere - we are on our way into another year of service, they were heading up to Jerusalem where Jesus was to fully surrender to God's will for him. Where or what is our Jerusalem, as a church, as individuals? Where or what is God calling you towards where you will have to surrender your will to his perfect will?

The wonderful thing about this verse 32, is that Jesus is leading, and we are the ones who are following after. Jesus, even today is prepared to lead us to where he wants us to go. He takes the lead in our lives and all we are required to do is follow after and trust. But why should we do this? Why should it be Jesus that we follow? In this world there are many religions that claim a religious head figure. What is wrong with any one of them – Why Jesus? Was Jesus God's anointed one - the Hebrew word "Messiah" or the Greek word, "Christ" – was He? We read verse 32 Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. <sup>33</sup>"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, <sup>34</sup>who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." The idea of a Messiah is one that is found throughout the Hebrew Bible. There, the Messiah's "I.D." is given to us.

Imagine looking up a friend by first locating his country. That would not be enough information, so you would need to ascertain his city, street, and specific number on that street. It would also help if you had a phone number and knew the time at which he would be home. Similarly, the Bible tells us the "I.D." of the Messiah. His ethnic background, place of birth, time frame of his arrival and other identifying characteristics are given. These "credentials" enable us to identify the Messiah, and to recognize imposters. Of course it might be objected that if these "credentials" are so clear, why didn't most Jewish people believe in Jesus, and why were they so taken in by false Messiahs that came after and before him? To understand this, one must realize that by the time of Jesus, the Messianic hope had become greatly politicized in the minds of the people. They were seeking deliverance from the tyranny of Rome. Although the Scripture spoke both of the sufferings and of the victories of the Messiah, the victorious aspect had become uppermost in the minds of the common people because of the Roman domination. This "lopsided" view of the Messiah has stuck with Jewish people, and the politicization of the Messianic hope has continued. Thus the hope of a political rather than a spiritual Messiah contributes to both the acceptance of people such as Bar Kochba, and the rejection of Jesus in his role as a Messiah. This is not to say that all Jewish people rejected the claims of Jesus. Far from that being the case, all the first followers of Jesus were Jews.

In fact, the rabbis of that time period and afterwards were well aware of the many Messianic prophecies which Christians claimed were fulfilled in Jesus. What, then, are some of the credentials of the Messiah? In the time we have this morning only a few can be listed; there are many others. All of these passages were recognized by the early rabbis as referring to the Messiah: Messiah was to be born at Bethlehem: Micah 5:1 Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah: Genesis 49:10 Messiah would present himself by riding on an ass: Zechariah 9:9 Messiah would be tortured to death: Psalms 22 Messiah would arrive before the destruction of the Second Temple: Daniel 9:24-27 Messiah's life would match a particular description, including suffering, silence at his arrest and trial, death and burial in a rich man's tomb, and resurrection: Isaiah 52:13-53:12 In detail as to lineage, birthplace, time, and lifestyle, Jesus matched the Messianic expectations of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The record of this fulfillment is to be found in the pages of the New Testament. But several other factors combine to further substantiate the Messiahship of Jesus. In the first place, he claimed to be the Messiah!

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When a woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming." he replied, "I who speak to you am he." Naturally, that doesn't prove anything one way or the other.

But if Jesus had never made the claim to be the Messiah, why would we bother to try and prove that he was? His own claim lays the groundwork for the rest of the evidence. The resurrection is a third piece of additional evidence, and it is perhaps the most convincing vindication of Jesus' claims. And here in Mark 10 verse 33 and 34 Jesus goes on further to explain to the disciples what it is that he has come to do. But then on hearing this the Messiah syndrome seems to set in for James and John, <sup>5</sup>Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." <sup>36</sup>"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. <sup>37</sup>They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

Here we see them asking for Messianic status when Christ gets to glory. As I have said before, they could see the glory and not the gore, they could see the crown but not the cross. They were attracted to this idea of the Messiah and they wanted in on it. The other disciples were, we read, indignant with James and John for making such a request. We are not sure from where their annoyance came from. Was it a feeling that James and John had gone behind their backs and pipped them to the post since all of them maybe had the same feelings of self inflated grandeur? Or were they generally feeling that this was an unreasonable thing for anyone to ask of Jesus? Who knows but Jesus explains to them what being the Messiah really meant: "...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Messiah did not come to be king and to rule but the messiah came to serve others and then to die for them. This is what we are called to as a church at the beginning of a new season and we will be doing some thinking about this very issue tonight at our evening communion service.

In closing then this morning, let me ask you a question. What is it that you want most from a relationship with Jesus Christ?

- A gateway into glory?
- A seat on a throne beside him in his kingdom?
- A place fairly close to the front of the queue when rewards are being handed out?
- Perhaps in this life you want positions of leadership and to have the love and adoration of many.

If any of these kinds of benefits or perks are what you are after because of your relationship to Jesus then you need to be careful lest you are suffering from the Messiah syndrome.

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In your relationship with Jesus, are you prepared to be humble enough in this life to live the life of the Messiah, a life that was lived as a life of service? This is what it means to be "like Jesus" and I want to encourage you back to church this evening as we take a moment to look at this concept as we start our service to God afresh at the beginning of a new year.

Let's pray together.