

6 A Pilgrim

(Matthew 21:7-9)

If it were possible to tell you, I would. If it were possible to write it down, I would. If a word could be found that could in any way preserve that look for you, I would use it. But there is nothing. Nothing that the greatest artist or the most skilful writer could do through which you could gather even one tenth of one percent of the reality of that look.

I've been to Jerusalem many times before. I've travelled that road over the hill and down into the city many times before. It's the hardest but the best way to enter the city. From the top you look down on its glory, its splendour, its beauty. No matter how many times you travel that road that first sight of the city will take your breath away, it will leave you speechless. The road is usually busy at Passover but not like it was that day. The crowd was thicker than I have ever known it, but it was not so much the numbers as the sense, the strange sense of anticipation, of excitement, of rejoicing that really struck me.

I'd seen him before of course, who hadn't? We all knew the stories of miracles, his teaching and parables and the many times he had silenced the Pharisees and teachers as they had tried to catch him out, to twist his words and to accuse him of blasphemy. But they had not succeeded, they had not succeeded because here he was. Here he was in the centre of this crowd. Here he was riding a donkey into Jerusalem as his followers and pilgrims alike sang his praise: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming King! Hosanna in the highest!"

The adulation, the praise, even the worship, meant nothing to him. It didn't move him, it didn't stir his heart or soul, he didn't respond, he didn't soak up its delights, bask in its adoration. He simply looked.

The Donkey stepped slowly and carefully, slowly and carefully over palm branches and cloaks that were strewn on the stony road as it wound its way up the far side of the Mount of Olives, Heading ever upward in twists and turns. Each turn trying to convince a weary traveller that they were at its summit, only to dash their hopes with its relentless upward climb.

He kept his gaze fixed ahead, turning neither left or right, looking at no one, just staring ahead. It was a face drawn with lines of determination. A face set, as if prepared and waiting for a moment of pain, a moment expected, a moment that was bound to come, but then a moment of agony that was to inevitably be unexpected in its intensity and timing. A face firmly set, until, passing over the final ridge, the ever climbing and twisting road ahead was replaced by the vast panorama of the city below. Jerusalem, O Jerusalem.

And that is when I saw his look, that indescribable look. A look that was at one and the same time delving to the very depths of the deepest despair and yet soaring to the heights of the very greatest joy. A look that was at one and the same time overflowing with the deepest of loves and yet wracked with the most torturous of pains.

The Donkey stopped and for a moment the crowd fell silent. He held out his arms, and as I looked, whether I saw it or not, his arms seemed to stretch out further and further. Stretching and reaching, stretching and reaching out to embrace the crowd, to embrace the city, to embrace the world, to embrace me.

Time seemed to have stopped. This brief moment in time seemed to have become a moment of eternity, a pause in the fabric of time and space. a pause that for some reason I knew only he could bring to an end. If he had stayed where he was then time would have stopped too, but only if he moved on, onwards and downwards into Jerusalem, only if he moved on could time begin it's relentless passage once again. I looked into that extraordinary face, and even before the donkey took it's next step, I knew. I knew that he had given himself, given himself to Jerusalem, given himself to all that lay ahead.

The Donkey continued its careful steps. Downward now, onward and downward. Down to the city, and down to?well, I hardly dare tell you, for those arms were stretched out again, stretched out with the piercing agony of rough iron nails. And, as I Stood on that God-forsaken hilltop and watched all that unfolded that day, I knew, I knew that his arms were stretched out to embrace the crowd, to embrace the city, to embrace the world, to embrace me.

I started my journey home very early on the first day of the week. The sun was just rising as I reached the top of the Mount of Olives. I left behind all of those dramatic events. His tomb was sealed, he was gone, gone the same way that so many others like him had. But as I reached the top and turned to look again over the city I had a strange sense that this was not the end. A sense that there was more to this story, more to come. "How?" I thought to myself. "Can the dead rise?" I dismissed the thought and turned on my way leaving the city behind me.

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