

The long journey is coming to a close. Putting aside the theologically tinted glasses that the Gospel writers would have us wear it's possible to get a sense of how this day has come to be, and how it plays out.

At some stage, Jesus has decided that he must go to Jerusalem, and that it should be for the Passover festival. This isn't really surprising – every adult male Jew was expected to attend the great festivals at the Temple in Jerusalem if able to do so, and Passover was the Festival of Festivals.

And – reading between the lines – Jesus went frequently! The Temple was “ground-zero” for any faithful Jew, and Jesus was just that. Sometimes he went alone – remember the story of him sitting in the Temple precinct listening to the sound of money being donated in the story of the Widow's Mite? This time he had the Twelve with him.

Setting aside the gospels' biases it's still clear that Jesus has come to Jerusalem with a purpose beyond celebrating Passover, that this purpose has to do with how he understands himself and his ministry as a faithful Jew, and that he is personally fearful of the outcome.

Along with him come his closest male friends – the Twelve. He stays where he always stays – with three more very close friends: Mary and Martha and Lazarus, in Bethany, which is a short 2 miles to the east of the Temple, down and then up the sides of the Kidron Valley and just over the rim of the Mount of Olives on the edge of the high desert.. All around Bethany – and it's twin village, Bethpage – people are seeking shelter for the night before entering Jerusalem – some brought tents, many stayed in caves, or, like Jesus and his disciples, with friends.

It's clear – even though the Gospels can't say this – that by the time they gather in Bethany Jesus inner circle number more than the Twelve and include at least three women: Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene. What a mixture those disciples are! Some peasant fishermen, an extortionist, a terrorist/freedom fighter (depending on who you listen to); independently wealthy, strong and devout women; and one very ambiguous figure who may have been the greatest betrayer of all time, or Jesus' most faithful friend – the Gospels mask Judas' identity behind layers of misinformation and self-serving plot twists, such that we will never know for sure which he is.

Jesus is guarded – he keeps his plans mostly to himself. His disciples know he intends to go to the temple, but ever since he frightened them with talk of death on the Mount of Transfiguration he's a little worried they might try and stop him.

As they look out on Jerusalem they look over a sea of people who have arrived for the great Festival. The usual 25,000 population inside the city walls of Jerusalem has swelled four- or five-fold – and increase that brings the city both increased income through the money spent on lodging and sacrificial animals, but also because all incoming Jews are required to spend a tenth of their annual income (after taxes) within Jerusalem.

Imagine Vancouver during the Winter Olympics, and multiply that 100 fold, and you get the idea! This is a festive time! Much celebration – buy anything you want; lots of souvenirs! But it's also a time of real danger.

It's dangerous because a huge population of mostly male Jews are about to celebrate a festival commemorating freedom from the oppression of a domineering empire, while suffering under the oppression of a domineering empire! The emotional tinder is tinder dry. All it takes is the right theological match....! It's happened before!

Pilate knows this! Despite some claims about excessive brutality Pilate is a fairly standard mid-level Roman official, no more but nor no less brutal than the any prefect in any Roman

province. He spends most of his time enjoying the cool sea breezes at Caesarea Maritima, the greatest port in the eastern Mediterranean, about 60 miles North-West of Jerusalem, and his official base-of-operations. Who would want to suffer the miserable heat and dryness of the high desert? But three times a year, Pilate goes to Jerusalem, for the feasts of Tabernacles, Harvest (Pentecost) and this one – Passover. He goes wearing full dress armor, and surrounded by cavalry – the mobile armor of the 1st Century.

And the message? Think of the old footage of the Germans entering Paris and you get the message. “Don’t mess with us because we can kill you – and we will!” If the opportunity presents itself to crucify a few individuals as a further display of power, all the better. Here is a display Roman imperial might intended to warn the Jewish populace to put aside any thoughts of revolt based on the echoes of their fight for freedom in Egypt.

Sometime during what we call Palm Sunday Pilate arrives at the Main Gate of Jerusalem on the west side of the city and enters closest to King Herod’s palace. Upon arrival he unceremoniously turns King Herod out of his royal apartments and – temporarily – makes them his own, lest anyone miss the point about who’s really in charge.

The god of War has come from the west.

And From the East? Who comes from the east, from the opposite side of the city? Who enters through the gate reserved only for Kings? Who rides that animal – an ass – ridden by kings when they wanted to send the message that they were coming not for war but in peace? Who is it who’s way is strewn with branches of Palm?

Palm branches were used by the Faithful when they came to Jerusalem for one of those other three festivals: Tabernacles. Each night mini-booths were build by the pilgrims as a place where God could dwell, so that God would stay with them for the whole of their journey, and not leave them at night when they were most vulnerable.

At Tabernacles, the liturgy called for a particular prayer: “God, Save us!” Do you know what “God, Save us!” is in Hebrew? “Hosanna!” Hosanna.

The Prince of Peace has come from the East.

The human wave that moves inexorably down from the Mount of Olives, flanking Jesus, onward toward the celebration of Passover – they know who this man is, they know what he preaches, they know what he represents, and they hope.

The stage is set. All the actors are rehearsing their lines. We are all now ready to watch with some understanding – to watch and to pray – as the central drama of humanity play itself out before our eyes.