

Jesus in Jerusalem, Brussels, and Melbourne

Rev Dr Jong Soo Park

[1]

Six months ago, the Korea Tourism Organisation began to make a tourism commercial series titled 'Feel the Rhythm of Korea' to introduce South Korea's beautiful cities one by one. The series is very successful, and until now, more than 600 million people around the world have watched it and spoken highly of its creative ideas and styles. This morning I will show you one of the videos introducing Seoul.

[#Video clip, Feel the Rhythm of Korea-Seoul]



How do you like it? I watched it a couple of times and was so impressed by its artistic creativity. And, a question came to my mind, 'To what extent can those who do not know Korean culture catch the artistic points behind it?' Many people worldwide have enjoyed this video, maybe because the music and dance are great, or they are great fans of Korean pop culture such as K-pop, K-drama, and K-beauty. Of course, they can enjoy the music without having a deep knowledge of Korean culture, but they might be able to taste it much deeper if they had.

As you would notice, the music titled *Tiger is Coming* in the video is a modernised version of the traditional Korean music, *Pansori*. *Pansori* is a musical storytelling, and it usually takes at least four to eight hours to complete singing a story. The music video sings a part of an old story, *Sea Palace*, about a turtle's adventure on land to get a rabbit's liver to cure the Dragon King of the sea. Although the sea palace commissioned the turtle, he had not seen a rabbit before in his life.

On the way, he encountered a tiger, guessed it was a rabbit, and called, “Hey, rabbit!” The tiger was upset and hungry, and advanced towards the turtle. The music *Tiger is Coming* is about that absolute crisis for the turtle. If we know this background and listen and watch the video, we can understand its choreography's dynamic gestures and catch the urgent voice of the singers. Likewise, knowledge of the context is critical in understanding the text richly and thoroughly.

[2]

I began today's reflection by mentioning the importance of understanding the context because we face a similar situation in today's Gospel scripture containing the narrative of Jesus' entering Jerusalem. This story is famous. Most Christians and even non-Christians have heard about this event. However, I think that many people have misunderstood the meaning of the story or missed an essential factor behind it.

If I were to describe this narrative with a word, I would use the word *paradox*. The story is paradoxical, in which two unmixable thoughts coexist: the traditional Jewish belief in the Messiah and the Christian concept of the Messiah based on Jesus' acts. These two different theologies are causing visible or invisible tensions, which is the complex context of today's Gospel text.

John 12:12-13 say, “The great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” According to Mark 11:8, many people also spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread palm branches. In the Jewish culture, a palm branch meant victory and spreading cloaks on the road was a sign of praising the king, which revealed clearly the long-standing Jewish hope of the Messiah being a king.

The crowd believed that Jesus might be the Messiah who was able to destroy the Roman Empire and rule the world powerfully like King David. Due to the rapid changes of Palestine's political landscape in the 1st century A.D., the Jewish society was divided into several sects such as the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Herodians, depending on their political orientations. However, regardless of their political differences, most of them were expecting to see the Messiah as a king.

Even Jesus' 12 disciples believed that their rabbi came as the king, so they could not accept Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death at all. In the end, Judas Iscariot sold his master for 30 pieces of silver, and all the other disciples ran away when their master was arrested. The event of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem highlighted how the Jewish people thought of Jesus. They welcomed and praised Jesus, but they were not interested in knowing who Jesus really was.

At that place, Jesus appeared riding a donkey, which did not match such a triumphant parade on that day. A horse would have been appropriate for that atmosphere rather than a donkey. A donkey is a working animal for ordinary people. It is not a symbol of power or victory, but a symbol of serving or humility.

By riding a young donkey, Jesus wanted to reveal his identity as the Messiah as a servant before the crowd that waved palm branches to him. He intended to proclaim that he came to serve the poor, the weak, and the marginalised enough to die for them rather than conquer and rule the world. He came to break down the worldly logic and order to set up the divine way to reconcile human beings with God. Likewise, those two unmixable thoughts resisted one another in this event, which was the paradoxical context we must recognise. Then, how should we interpret the narrative?

[3]

There is a painting titled '*Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889.*' The artwork was painted by James Ensor, a talented Belgium artist. I think this painting is one of the best works interpreting the event theologically. James recognised the paradox in the story, and put that spiritual tension in his painting brilliantly. This is his work.



Can you find Jesus in this picture? Yes, he is in the centre in the upper middle of the painting. He rides a donkey in the parade between two groups of people. The people in front of Jesus are the crowd attending a traditional Belgium street festival. They wear a funny mask or costume and enjoy the parade. A musical band follows them and adds to the amusement, playing music.

Interestingly, the people behind Jesus are not carnival-goers, but the socialist protesters criticising the day's economic and political crisis. They shout "Vive La Sociale," the phrase in the red banner at the top of the painting, which means 'Long live, Socialism!' These people are in the same space, but they are extremely divided, which is exactly the same as the Jewish crowd in today's narrative. In this massive crowd, no one pays attention to Jesus except for some people around him, but even those near him do not recognise who he is, but make fun of him riding on a donkey.



Look at people's faces around Jesus; feel the atmosphere that they make. Yes, it's weird, uncomfortable, and even humiliating. The bottom line is, however, Jesus is there. His presence does not match this chaotic and disrespectful scene, but he decides to stay there with them, not leaving the place.

Why? This is the reason he was incarnated; he came as a human being to accept and embrace us all, no matter who we are. Matthew 1:23 says, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God with us'." This scene that the artist captured is the essence of the Gospel. This is what today's Gospel text reminds us of through the paradoxical tension.

[4]

Sisters and brothers,

If Jesus entered Melbourne in 2021, what would happen? I think we might see things very similar to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and *Brussels*. The majority in our society would not be able to recognise him with their indifference, and even Christians would be separated into several sects due to different beliefs and dogmas.

Many of them would believe what they want to believe and shout what they would like to say. Some would wave palm branches to him, while others would raise political banners for social justice. No matter how chaotic it is, what's certain is that Jesus must be with us where we are. He must be in the crowd, in front of us, behind us, and next to us. Sometimes he would be invisible because of our unfaith or busyness, but if we try to find him, he would be found easily as he is always near us. For he is Immanuel. Amen.