

One of my social duties is as lay preacher at [First Presbyterian Church, Portage la Prairie](#). Here is the text of the sermon I delivered April 2, 2023

“Did you hear, the Messiah comes”

Introduction

I sometimes try to imagine what people we’re doing during events like the first Palm Sunday. With this in mind, here are a few fictional stories about some of the people who lived in Jerusalem at that time. We’ll start in the days before Palm Sunday and wind up at Jesus’ entrance into the city.

Simon the Merchant and His Wife Sarah

Let’s join Simon the Merchant. The market probably looked a lot like this one in today’s Jerusalem.



Jerusalem Old City Market, Israel

Credit: [Radosław Botev](#),

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Simon the Merchant was glad that the Sabbath had come. Yesterday was a crazy day.

At his stall in the marketplace he sold iron goods: tools of various kinds and especially nails. On the day before this Sabbath, the day that the gentiles named after the planet Venus and that the Jews simply called Day 6, Simon had been busy selling to his usual customers, mostly building contractors, but also everyday folk who just needed a nail or a hammer.

But yesterday was different. Early in the morning, soon after Simon had set up his stall for the day, Jacob the Fool dropped by. Jacob made a living entertaining people in the marketplace – cracking jokes and singing satirical songs for tips. That one he sang about the High Priest enjoying Italian

prosciutto ham with his Roman friends landed Jacob in jail for a couple of days. He still had a black eye from making a sexually explicit remark about Roman soldier's wife; he thought he was making a compliment.

Today, however, Jacob was serious, he said:

Did you hear – the Messiah is coming!

Simon replied

Of course he's coming some day.

Jacob emphasized:

No, no, this time it's for real. He is coming on Day 1 of next week.

Simon asked:

And who is this Messiah?

He almost added, "this time". Jacob replied:

Why it's Yeshua, Jesus of the Nazareth, the Rabbi, the miracle worker, the prophet and now he his coming as our Messiah to save us!

Jacob then walked down the street proclaiming the news. Simon wondered if Jacob was entirely sane. He also thought that this could lead to trouble.

Simon's customers often mentioned the coming arrival in Jerusalem of the Rabbi Jesus. Some were excited by the news, they wanted a Messiah. Some only hoped to hear a good rousing sermon. Others were worried, there could be trouble in this. The Romans were not known for being gentle in these matters. Some, like Hiram the Builder, were cynical. He had seen other, so called Messiahs, and they had all come to a bad end.

Later that day, Cassius, a slave owned by the Legionary cohort permanently stationed in Jerusalem, came to buy nails. The ten inch kind used for crucifixions.

Simon asked:

How many do you need?

Cassius replied

A dozen

Simon and Cassius didn't haggle much

At the usual price?

Yes, the usual price.

Simon added:

If you need more, you know where to find me.

Cassius then said, ominously,

With all this talk of another Messiah, we might just might need some more.

About an hour later, of all people, the Head Priest Caiaphas dropped by and asked to buy four ten-inch nails.

How much, asked Caiaphas

A shekel, your Grace

Caiaphas handed over the shekel without any haggling. Usually a shekel would buy a dozen ten-inch nails.

When he got home, before sundown, Simon was quiet and said nothing all evening. The next day, his wife, Sarah, asked him what was the matter? Simon told her about news from the day before and strange happenings.

She asked

What does this mean?

He responded

It could be trouble. Tomorrow I want you, Jonathan and the Salome to stay at home. Keep off the streets. There could be serious trouble.

Sarah agreed. She was tempted to go and see this preacher, Jesus. But in all their years of marriage, Sarah had never disobeyed her husband and she wasn't going to start now. Besides, she had never seen Simon so worried. She embraced her husband and assured him that they do as he wished.

Deborah, wife of Nathan the Priest



The Judgment of the Sanhedrin – He is Guilty!

Credit: Nikolai Ge, Tretyakov Gallery, public domain

Deborah was excited and was looking forward to seeing her husband on that afternoon before the Sabbath began. She had marvellous news. The midwives had confirmed it, Deborah was expecting their first child.

But when her husband came home, just before sundown, the look on his face said that it had been a difficult day, so she held back on her news and asked:

Is there something the matter, dear?

You'll have to promise not to tell anyone.

I promise.

I spent the day attending to Caiaphas while he presided over the Sanhedrin.

They met all day?

Yes, and they debated only one thing, this hillbilly preacher from Galilee, Jesus.

Yes, I heard he was coming. Is it true that he is the Messiah foretold by Scripture?

He might be, a lot of the debate was on that subject. I kept getting scrolls of the Prophets for Caiaphas to read out loud to the Council. Most of the Sanhedrin are skeptical. Either way, there could be danger. The Romans are likely to want to get rid of any self proclaimed Messiah. If it gets out of hand, we could have an insurrection on our hands. That would be a bloody affair with lots of dead people.

So what are they going to do?

Watch and see for now. Some want to arrest him right away, but for now he's done nothing that would warrant that. I heard someone suggest that he could hire a hit man to kill Jesus, he said he knew one. The Sanhedrin agreed that not only was that wrong and contrary to our law, it would probably spark the kind of trouble we were hoping to avoid. There was another odd thing.

Oh?

When I went to see Caiaphas, just before I went with him to the Sanhedrin meeting, he was sitting at his desk, staring at four long nails. But enough of me, I can tell you want to tell me something.

Deborah smiled from ear to ear

I went to see Ruth and Hannah today.

The midwives?

Yes.

And?

We're going to have a baby!

Praise be the Lord!

The next day, after Nathan had done his duties at the Temple, they talked about what was coming; and the dangers. Nathan then said:

I talked with your brother John today, he is planning to visit your mother in Bayt Jala, I want you to go with him and stay there until I send for you. I am sure that your mother would love to see you and hear your good news.

Yes, when do I leave with John?

Day 1, in the morning. It will be safer for you and our baby that way.

Cassius and Julia



Screenshot from the trailer of the film [King of Kings](#)
Credit: [King of Kings](#) trailer, [public domain](#)

Cassius Decius Antoninus came home to his quarters in the Roman garrison after dropping off the nails with at the Quartermaster's Store. Once inside his home, he took off his slave costume and put on the fine uniform of a Roman Centurion. He then sat down for his midday meal with Julia and their two boys, 8 year old Gaius and 4 year old Secundus. Cassius then went to work composing his report to the Procurator, Pontius Pilate.

Cassius pondered on his deception of dressing like a slave whenever he went to the marketplace; it was a good way to gather information and be innocuous. Cassius had learned Aramaic from his Syrian mother, he spoke it like a native and it made the disguise all the more believable. An educated man, he also spoke Greek as well as his father's tongue, Latin.

In some ways, as a Roman soldier, he was a slave. But no ordinary one. Cassius had the rank of Centurion in the *Frumentarii*, the Roman Army's intelligence and courier service. His job was to gather information on what was happening in Jerusalem and especially to keep track of these crazy Messiahs who caused so much trouble. Cassius had half a dozen men watching this latest one, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was supposed to come to Jerusalem on Sunday, after the Jewish Sabbath. Pilate needed to know what trouble awaited him when he came next week.

When the family had finished their meal, the cook and the maidservant ate their meal and then cleaned up afterwards. Julia, meanwhile, sat down to her usual chore, making clothing for her family as was the normal duty of Roman women. She made the fine uniform that Cassius wore around the barracks under his armour. She was a much better tailor than any she had seen among the Legionaries. Today she was finishing a new outfit for Gaius; the boys grow so fast, she said. While sewing, weaving or spinning Julia frequently prayed to Juno, the Mother Goddess and wife to Jupiter, that she would grant them a daughter. For good measure, she also implored the local God, even though no one would tell her his name. Still, her Roman common sense told her it was good to honour the local Gods, or, in this case, a God whose name was too sacred to name out loud. Life was uncertain, you had to hedge your bets. Her prayer was also an urgent one, at 35 she wasn't young anymore.

Later, the maidservant, Atia, joined Julia and went to work spinning wool into yarn. The cook, Nennia, was working on something for the evening meal. Nennia had been with their family since Julia and Cassius were married 15 years ago, she was actually part of Julia's dowry. Atia was Nennia's daughter, about 14 years old. Nennia never told them who the father was except to say that it wasn't Cassius but that it was another Legionary. Nennia told Atia that her father had died during one of the campaigns, which was true, but would only tell her his name when she was older.

Both Julia and Cassius were from military families, army brats. Both had fathers who were officers in the Roman Legions and they had arranged for the two of them to be married. Although they often moved around to new postings, Julia thought that her marriage was a happy one even though their first child, a daughter, had died young. Cassius was a good man; he never beat her and when disciplining the two boys, he was stern but never excessive. However, she saw the harsh side of him the other day when they both heard a Jew, Jacob the Fool, make an off-coloured remark about Julia's sexual attractiveness. Cassius knocked Jacob to the ground with a single blow, giving the man a black eye. "That should teach you to treat a Roman lady with respect" Cassius said to the foolish man.

After the evening meal, Cassius asked Gaius to go fetch Frennius, one of the couriers, and bring him to Cassius. Gaius did as he was told and Cassius gave the papyrus report to Frennius.

Now Frennius, I have always been able to rely on you. This is important. First thing in the morning, you go take this report to Pilate in Caesaria. He may be on his way here so keep an eye out for them on the road. He must get this as soon as possible. He's waiting for it.

Yes, sir said Frennius.

Frennius gave a Roman salute to Cassius and then left, giving a wink to Atia as he passed by her. Nennia noticed and thought to herself, I need to have a talk with that girl.

As ordered, first thing Saturday morning, Frennius set off with the report for Pilate. The rest of the day, Cassius spent listening to his informants as they dropped by to see him. Cassius kept careful notes.

After the midday meal Cassius summoned his wife and sons.

Julia, things could get dangerous here in Jerusalem, would you like to visit our friend Cornelius in Caesaria until things are a bit safer?

Indignantly, Julia responded:

If you order me, I will go. Given a choice, I will stay with you, my husband. Do you remember when we were young in Germania? Our two fathers were among the few Legionaries left in Triers after the massacre of the three Legions in the German forest. I wasn't afraid then and I am not afraid now. I am a Roman Matron, as brave as any man in the Legion.

Smiling, Cassius responded

What can I say to that? Of course you will stay. Clearly the Gods blessed me when we were wed.

On Sunday, after making his morning offerings to the Gods, Cassius summoned the dozen or so informers in his pay and instructed them:

I want you all in the crowd welcoming this Jesus fellow. I want to find out where he goes and what he says. Keep an eye on his close associates. The one they call Simon Peter seems to be the closest one to Jesus, but find out more about the others. If we're lucky, and keep ahead of these guys, we can keep this from getting out of hand. It's bad policy to kill too many taxpayers.

Off you go now.

Palm Sunday



Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday

Credit: [Michel Bakni](#) (photographer),

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Deborah and her brother, John, left by the same gate that Jesus entered. Nathan was there also with them to say good bye. The Nazarene then came in through the gate, riding a donkey. Riding up to them, Jesus looked directly at Deborah and said:

God bless you and the child you bear.

Astonished, Deborah said to Nathan:

How did he know that? Maybe he is the Messiah?

Nathan said nothing except to bid his wife goodbye.

Cassius' people were in the crowd that welcomed Jesus. As was Cassius himself, dressed again as a common Syrian slave. They noted Jesus' followers and kept a close eye on them. Jesus looked at Cassius when the crowd pushed them close together. Jesus leaned over to Cassius and quietly said to him alone:

I know who you are. But rest assured and know that your power comes from the Almighty and that you can do nothing to me without his permission. All that happens now is as it must be. My mission here is to fulfill God's will. Also, tell your wife that God has heard her prayer; you're going to have a daughter in 9 months.

Jesus had a strangely compelling way about him. This made Cassius even more worried. He was a pious man who feared angering the Gods. What was this strange man, and his jealous God, going to do now?

In earshot of Cassius, Simon Peter said to Jesus:

They love you Jesus. We could make this city ours today. Just give the word.

Jesus replied

And then what, Peter? How many would die because of that vanity? My Kingdom is not of this world. Besides, they praise me today but in a week they will call for my crucifixion. That is also my Father's will.

Jesus' procession gathered more and more spectators. People spread their cloaks on the ground and also palm branches. People sang Psalms, especially those said to be written by King David. The crowd was full of religious enthusiasm. For many, it was the most exciting time that had experienced in their lives. Surely the Lord God of Israel was among them today and had brought them their Messiah.

As he passed through the crowd, Jesus would turn to individuals and say something private, just as he had done with Deborah and Cassius.

To one man he said:

You have a good wife, quit dishonouring her with that whore. Your wife doesn't know....yet. Repent!

To one of the merchants, he said:

Repent, the Lord knows when you have been less than honest.

To Simon the Merchant he said

The Lord knows that you are an honest man. Don't worry, no harm will come to your family. But know this, the nails you sold to the Roman will be those that pierce my flesh. This is as it must be and it is accordance with my Father's will.

Simon was astounded by this but felt certain that Jesus was right and that his wife and children were going to be safe. He always knew why the Romans bought ten-inch nails.

To Jacob the Fool, Jesus said

Your faith is strong, and you are not quite the fool you make yourself out to be. Be careful making fun of the powerful. Caiaphas doesn't have a great sense of humour these days.

Jesus then touched Jacob's face and his black eye cleared up, with Jesus saying:

Also, be careful making jokes about men's wives.

The crowd wound its way through the streets. Jerusalem had not seen anything like it in living memory. Nor would it again.

Nennia and Atia were in the crowd as well, maybe this Messiah would free them from slavery. Unknown to their master, they had both secretly converted to the Jewish faith. Quickly, they bought the things Julia had asked them to get and rushed home before their mistress got angry. Cassius wasn't the only stern Roman in the family. Julia had a rope whip, and she used it.

One of Cassius' men followed the crowd all the way to where Jesus and his disciples were staying. Cassius ordered round the clock surveillance on Jesus.

Cassius wrote another report for Pilate, to give to him personally when he arrived. There was a lot to say. His informers had named the 12 disciples closest to Jesus. Except for Judas Iscariot, they were all Galilean hillbillies. There was also a woman, Mary of Magdala, who seemed to be Jesus' sweetheart. He noted that Jesus had recognized Cassius as a Roman and related the message that he gave him. The disguise is wearing thin, he thought, I had better be careful. The Zealots have hit men on the lookout for Romans. At least two of his informers had died mysteriously in the last month.

Nathan reported directly to Caiaphas what he had seen of Jesus' procession. All that he had seen increased his worries. Caiaphas saw his distress, put his hand on his shoulder, telling Nathan to pray and trust God. For now they would watch and wait. The Sanhedrin would meet again soon, probably on Day 3 when Pilate was expected to arrive. After Nathan left, Caiaphas sat down at his desk to think. In front of him were the four ten-inch nails he bought from Simon the Merchant.



Nails (x4) four hand made iron nails; from St. Mary's, Parnell; rusty
Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1968.63, col.2176
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Frennius met Pilate's party on the road to Caesaria and delivered Cassius' report directly to the Procurator. Pilate read it and said nothing except to tell them all to hurry along.

Julia finished the new outfit for Gaius and started on a new one for Secundus. Like she said, they grow so fast. She began to suspect that her prayer for a daughter had been answered as there were indications that she might be pregnant. She thought: where are those two slaves? They should be back by now. Also, where is my whip?

Deborah and John made it safely to Bayt Jala, it is a half hour walk west of Bethlehem. Deborah stayed with her mother for three weeks before coming back to Jerusalem.

Pontius Pilate made it to Jerusalem late on Tuesday. He and Cassius spent much of the evening talking about this strange prophet, Jesus. Both figured that Jesus' story would not end well for Jesus. Pilate said:

Good idea to keep a constant eye on this fellow Jesus. I have a sense we may need to crucify him to prevent more trouble. For all his gifts, he's a dangerous fanatic. Is your wife really pregnant?

She hopes so; there are indications. She is going tomorrow to see Helena, the Greek midwife.

May Juno grant you and Julia another child. As for Jesus, that's just what we need now, in the week before the Jewish festival: Another. Crazy. Messiah. Thank you Cassius, you're dismissed for now, but keep me informed.

Cassius gave the Procurator a Roman salute and marched off. Outside, one of his informants was waiting with more news.

And so we leave the story of Simon, Sarah, Jacob, Deborah, Nathan, Julia, Nennia, Atia and Cassius. Witnesses to Jesus Christ's arrival in Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday.