

SERMON for Palm Sunday – March 28th, 2021.

Readings: Zechariah 9: 9-10; Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 11: 1-11.

In 165 BC, Judas Maccabaeus defeated the Syrian army and entered Jerusalem and cleansed and rebuilt the Temple. He had been greeted by the people of Jerusalem singing hymns of praise to God and waving palm branches. He was made king and his royal dynasty lasted for 100 years.

The Jews commemorate the restoration of the Temple with the feast of Hanukkah, which can fall from late November to late December.

All four gospels record Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem that fateful year and as you can expect each tells it slightly differently. As usual with Mark, we have a very brief account of how they arrived, but it is designed to emphasize the focus of Jesus as King, as the all-conquering hero, the one who had come to bring freedom.

In Mark's version Jesus arrives riding a 'colt' (others tell us it was a donkey), and makes nothing of the theme of humility, which Matthew points to in quoting our first reading from the prophet Zechariah:

"Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

And just as Mark doesn't say that Jesus rode a donkey, neither does he say that the people waved palm branches; it could have been anything - corn or straw or leafy branches from trees.

Mark, however, does want to make clear, that since chapter 8, and Peter's statement that Jesus was the Messiah, the disciples believe that Jesus is the true and rightful King of the Jews, and he was now on his way to the capital city to be hailed as such. For Mark, this is the moment for his royal reception.

The crowds greet him as they would the all-conquering hero king and sing and shout "Hosanna!" Perhaps they are quoting part of this morning's psalm. Psalm 118: 26 says:

"Blessed is he who comes, in the name of the Lord".

The word "Hosanna" is a Hebrew word which mixes exuberant praise to God with the prayer that God will save his people ... and do it right away! "Save us now!"

So basically, they are saying: "Blessed is the one who comes! Welcome to the kingdom of our father David! Save us now!"

No wonder the authorities were getting upset!

The scene, and our reading, ends rather dramatically... with nothing happening, or not yet! Jesus goes into the Temple, looks around, and comes out again, and heads back out to Bethany where he is to stay with the twelve, probably (according to Luke) with Lazarus and his sisters. But Mark leaves us, for the moment, in suspense as to what will happen when this King makes his presence felt in his own city.

Of course, they still don't 'get it' do they!

The royalty which Jesus brings is not the royalty that they were expecting or even understood. In his teaching Jesus, had tried to explain but neither the crowds who flocked to him, nor his disciples really understood. (This lack of understanding, is one of the features of Mark's gospel).

I am particularly fond of the passage from Philippians, and particularly in this context, I believe it gives us some insight into Jesus' actions on that day.

... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross ... [Philippians 2: 6-8]

While he was equal with God, did not exploit it but humbled himself, taking on human form.

Lo your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. [Zechariah 9:9]

What does this raise for us, Christ-followers? How do we honour him? Would we get all excited and put the equivalent of our cloaks out on the dusty road for him? Or have we so domesticated and trivialized our Christian commitment, our devotion to Jesus himself, that we look on him simply as someone to help us through the various things we want to do anyway, someone to provide us with comforting religious experiences?

In our world where most countries don't have kings or queens, and where those monarchies that remain are mostly constitutional offices with the real power lying elsewhere, have we forgotten what, in biblical terms, a true king might be like? ¹

What did you do over Lent that was different, either taking something on or giving something up? How did you go? Lent is now over. Are you ready for what is the most important week of the Christian year? Holy Week? Are you ready to walk that journey to the Cross and beyond?

This week will take us to the Upper Room, and the foundational teachings Jesus will give during that Last Supper; it will take us to the Garden and his heart-felt prayer to God, that if there could be another way...

It will take us to the dark places, the really dark places of human nature: betrayal, desertion, lies, the blood lust of the crowds, the sadism of the soldiers, and finally to the Cross, to die one of the most excruciating deaths known.

What will be the words on my lips this week? "Hosanna" or "Crucify"?

Would I have tried to answer: "Who do you say that I am?" or would I have been one to shout: "Who do you think you are?" ²

Jesus entered Jerusalem as King ... but not the type of king they expected.

Jesus entered Jerusalem to bring freedom ... but not a political freedom.

Jesus entered Jerusalem to restore the temple ... not the physical temple, but the temple of our hearts.

Jesus' kingship, freedom and restoration are spiritual, personal.

Walk the journey with me this most holy week, and come celebrate the Easter joy, next week. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
28 March, 2021.

REFERENCES:

1. Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, © 2001, SPCK, pp. 145-149.
2. Anna Murdock, *Palm Sunday thoughts*, as posted on *Midrash*, 01.04.2012.