

Scripture for Palm Sunday

Zech 9:9-10

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Mark 11:1-11

11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, ⁹

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Sermon: A Misunderstood Man on a Mission

The Jewish Passover is the time of annual pilgrimage. Imagine crowds of people all making their way towards Jerusalem, some from distant lands making a trip of a lifetime. The pilgrims would stay with friends, distant relatives or within inns, both in the city and in the surrounding townships - like Bethany, just 2 miles away. It is one of the busiest times of the year for the temple priests and staff, including all the herdsman who bring their flocks of sheep so that people can purchase them for sacrifice. Passover is a time of both celebration and expectation; people, then and now, relive the rituals from the time of Moses. All of Israel is being reminded once again that God provided a Savior against an oppressive regime and released the people from their slavery in Egypt. Passover time in the first century was also a time of hope for a *new* rescuer to arise and liberate the people from the Romans once and for all. Passover was, then, a potentially explosive combination of religion, politics and nationalism. This is the context of today's reading and Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.

Unlike the other gospel writers, Mark does not mention any Old Testament texts, but their presence is always there in the background. And Mark's discerning Jewish audience would have understood those connections. For example, we were reminded of an Old Testament echo with our reading from Zechariah saying, "Your *king* comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of the donkey. . . . His dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth."¹ Perhaps the political context of Mark's own day made him a little cagey in what he wrote. We don't really know, but we can make reasonable inferences within the context of his whole gospel account. He was, after all, writing was around the time of another revolt that led to the destruction of Jerusalem – including the Temple in AD 70. In that context, we should note that these next few chapters in Mark's gospel are all focused on the Temple.

The journey up to Jerusalem on the route that passes through the Mount of Olives allows you to see, from that vantage point, the whole of the city.² This is the culmination of the ministry of Jesus the Messiah. Mark presents Jesus as a prophet with foresight. He tells two of his disciples to go into the village ahead, indicating the precise location where they can find a colt, one that has never been ridden, and they are to untie it and bring it to Jesus. The fact that Jesus knows where the colt will be suggests that everything is happening under the guidance of an unseen hand whose aims are in perfect harmony with those of Jesus, the Messiah. Matthew's account says the animal is a "donkey," and the Greek word is ambiguous. The connotation of donkey for us today is that of a dumb, silly animal. But this was *not* the perception in those days, and even a victorious King could ride on a donkey with dignity because it was the usual beast for riding. However, the time of the Passover, all pilgrims would *walk* into Jerusalem as a sign of their humility before God. Jesus, who walked everywhere in Galilee, deliberately chose to ride on a donkey into Jerusalem at Passover time. There

¹ Zech 9:9-10.

² See also Zech 14:4; "on that day" The LORD will stand on the Mount of Olives.

can be no doubt that Jesus was making a bold *political* statement by entering into Jerusalem in this way. Jesus knew what he was doing, and courageously did it anyway – for “his hour had come.” And yet, there are subversive elements, with irony and even humour, in the way Mark tells it.

As we just heard, Mark spends some time describing the travel arrangements that Jesus makes. In instructing his disciples, Jesus says that if anyone asks them why they are untying the colt they are to say that the “Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” First, Mark does *not* use the word “Lord” (*kyrios*) lightly. It is the word that can be translated simply as “master,” but it also can have political connotations as Caesar used the title “Lord.” The Bible translators simply use the word “Lord” which is perhaps most appropriate in this context because as Mark’s description unfolds we will see that Jesus is entering into Jerusalem *as if* he were a victorious *King*. Second, the Romans could confiscate such colt and use it with no thought as to the cost or loss to the owner. The Lord Jesus expressly tells the disciples to say that, “The Lord needs it and will *send it back here immediately*.” This King is a *different kind* of King.

The disciples follow their master’s instructions and find everything as Jesus had told them. Mark is perhaps suggesting that Jesus is in charge of the coming events, rather than the victim of them. He also makes the peculiar point that the colt “has never been ridden.” This again could be understood as symbolizing the *authority* of Jesus as he rides an animal that has not been broken in. And it is also fitting if we understand the colt as being used for a *sacred* purpose.

People throwing their cloaks on the ground in front of the path of Jesus echoes 2 Kings 9:13, where the people threw their cloaks on the ground in front of their new King. This signifies a *royal* welcome. And that cutting down of palm branches alludes to the time when Simon Maccabeus entered Jerusalem to the praise of the people as their *deliverer* (1 Macc 13:51).

It is also important to know that when pilgrims traveled, they often recited or sang psalms on their way. Psalm 118 (from our Call to Worship), was one such song, and was also used during an enthronement procession for a king, as well as when approaching the Temple. At Passover, when the priests watched the pilgrims coming into the city they would bless them saying “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you,” a quote from that psalm.³ Mark tells us, “*Those who went ahead and those who followed* shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” First, the people shouted “Hosanna,” (also a quote from Psalm 118:26), and the word literally means “Save, please” and is therefore a prayer *to God*. It is a cry to God “to break in to history and save your people now.” Second, the people add a reference to “the coming kingdom of our father David.” Their mention of the coming “kingdom of David” suggests that Jesus is being greeted as the heir to David’s throne. So they are not addressing their “hosanna” prayer *to God* to “save, please,” their shouts are addressed to

³ Ps 118:26

Jesus – which would raise the political tension to a new level. Indeed, in Luke’s account, the Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” And he refuses, saying, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”⁴ Mark makes no mention of this conversation; Jesus seems to ride in silence. Perhaps Jesus said to himself, “Yes, I am your Messiah and I will save you, but not in the way you expect.” Regardless, Jesus does not discourage the people from participating in the procession, nor from worshiping him.

At the end of the day, though, Jesus seems uninterested in restoring the Davidic monarchy. He merely takes a look at the Temple and then he leaves the city and spends the night in Bethany. This is an odd anticlimax, and we’re left wondering what will happen next. The irony of course is that we, like all the readers of Mark’s gospel, know something that the audience does not seem to know. We know what happened in the end. Within a week the acclamation he receives will turn to humiliation and mockery; the honoured Jesus will become the humiliated Jesus.

The people’s problem was not a *lack* of love Jesus. The problem was that it was *superficial* kind of love. One of the central claims of the Christian tradition that, “God is love.”⁵ This claim is not based on any abstract or sentimental notions about love; rather it is connected to *history*. God’s love is expressed through God’s activity in creating, redeeming, and sustaining the world – including you and me. That history is expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, along with the cloaks and palm branches, strangely challenges *us* to fight our tendency towards the delusion of superficial love. What Jesus demonstrated that first Easter week was a potent love that withstood the horrors of crucifixion. It is a kind of love that displays how elusive our sense of reality often is. The great philosopher once wrote that to love is to suffer. That kind of love is scary. God’s love is scary too. We are invited into God’s kind of love, which is not sentimental, selfish, or controlling. One thing Palm Sunday shows us is how we often misinterpret God’s love, as well as our love for God.

Jesus was a misunderstood man on a mission. We too, like the Palm Sunday crowds, often misunderstand Jesus. How do we misunderstand Jesus today? Don’t you find that is so much easier to see that in others who “claim” to be Christian, than in ourselves! One way we can misunderstand Jesus is when we wrap Jesus up with our party politics. While the drama of Palm Sunday was a deliberate political act; Jesus still associated with the vulnerable, not the victorious; the meek, not the mighty. His was a counter-cultural message of non-violence, and like Ghandi, suffered a violent death by those who feared its power. Christ’s “kingdom” was - and is - not meant to be an *earthly* kingdom – and we misinterpret his message if we go down that route. The notion of a “Christian country” is therefore one way to misunderstand Jesus. We see this most vividly with the unholy marriage of Trumpism and the Evangelical right in America. The good news of the gospel is the loser in that alliance in which some Christians shamefully court political power and influence at any price. Certainly the message of Jesus challenges and shapes our political views, but that is because the message

⁴ Luke 19:39.

⁵ 1 John 4:8.

challenges *all* aspects of life. We need to reflect upon the politically subversive nature of the kingdom of God, which challenges our systems of power rather than being complicit in this world's power games. That is the irony of Palm Sunday! Jesus is indeed Lord and King, but the meanings of those words are not to be wrapped in power, but of a love that is prepared to suffer for his subjects.

Easter Week is a time to humbly reflect on how we might be misunderstanding Jesus and his message, whether that is for selfish, thoughtless, or misguided reasons. It is also a time to reflect on our love for Jesus and the depth of his love for us. Like the Passover travellers, we too are pilgrims. I invite you this Holy week, of all the weeks in the Christian calendar, to journey with Jesus. To help with that pilgrimage, I have put the daily lectionary readings on the back of bulletin. Please take it home and take 10 minutes each day to read the texts, especially those from John's gospel. And as you do, ask God's Spirit to illuminate your spirit - and receive and be refreshed. Jesus wants to journey with us every day, not just to leap from Sunday to Sunday. As we prepare for the week ahead, let us include Jesus, and walk the journey with him from Palm Sunday through Good Friday and beyond. Amen.