

Palm Sunday 2021 Mark 11:1-11

Making a good entrance is always important, isn't it?

The events we have just heard described to us by Mark at the start of the service are usually termed the Triumphal Entry. Here we have Jesus entering Jerusalem on an ass. It appears to have been a planned event – we even have the password to authenticate the vehicle hire – “The Lord needs it”. No chip & pin or identity card in those days, you see.

And it seems to be done in a way that suggests it is a kind of prophecy.

Matthew, in his version of this event, is alert to this, quoting Zechariah 9:9 (which we also had this morning). There is a sense in which Jesus' entry to Jerusalem was a prophetic action, building on those precedents. Like them he reinforces his message with a symbolic action.

Moreover, Jesus appears to be entering Jerusalem in the spirit of an earlier age when foreign oppression and pagan religion took its toll. Listen to this from the apocrypha - 1 Maccabees 13, which is part of the history of what happened to the Jews between the Old Testament and the New in the second century BC. Jerusalem is being cleared of its occupiers and being retaken by the Jews.

Then they cried to Simon to make peace with them, and he did so. But he expelled them from there and cleansed the citadel from its pollutions. ⁵¹ On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel. ⁵² And Simon decreed that every year they should celebrate this day with rejoicing. (1 Macc. 13:50-52)

Later on from that period of the Maccabean wars, as they were known, we know that the Temple had been profaned by its conquerors – sacrifices to Zeus, pigs offered on the altar, and more (2 Macc. 6). And again Judas Maccabeus liberated the city and when they celebrate, chapter 10 of the same book tells us that it was like the Feast of Tabernacles, and they carried, yes you guessed it, palm fronds (2 Macc. 10:7)

This connection would be strong in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, even if it's a bit lost on us. Jesus' arrival would be seen as a triumph, cleansing and victorious. And it all takes place around the Feast of Passover, when thousands upon thousands of Jews gathered in the vicinity of Jerusalem. This was to celebrate their liberation from oppression by the Egyptians, as they began their journey to the desert, to receive the Law, and eventually come to the Promised land.

The paradox of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is that his arrival appears to set up one set of expectations, which he then systematically subverts.

He goes into the Temple, and we know that he cleanses the Temple, not by rituals at the altar, or by excelling in devotion over the priests, but by throwing over the table of the money-changers.

He challenges the authority of Caesar by the symbolism of the way he enters Jerusalem as a king. This is a powerful political act, which would feed into the national aspirations of the Jews, as well as fuel the fears of the Romans about their ability to govern this troublesome province. And yet he says render to Caesar what is due to Caesar...

And he identifies himself with a purist movement – the Maccabean revolt, which must have endeared him to the fervent - the zealots - the people we would call fundamentalist militants today, and then spends most of a chapter denouncing the scribes and Pharisees, and refuses to pursue an armed or military agenda.

In that sense, Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem represents an act of judgment. Perhaps you recall these words from John's gospel:

19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:19-21 NRSV)

It's like those moments when you lift up a stone, and all the ants and other bugs run for cover, fleeing the light, seeking safety in their underground tunnels. The light of the world is here at the city gates.

Jesus enters Jerusalem, and everyone has a reaction to what he has done – the initial enthusiasm of the crowd shouldn't distract us from what is going on underneath. They shout hosanna – save us, or save now. It's the cry of an oppressed people. But just the presence of Jesus, and his refusal to waver to meet people's expectations exposes people's hearts.

Jesus is, of course, the one who can save. His is the genuinely pure one, who will offer a perfect sacrifice in the real heavenly sanctuary, as the writer to the Hebrews would put it (Heb. 9:24), and he is the real king before whom even mighty Caesar will one day bow. But here, none of that is explicit; he just comes, true to himself, and everyone else's reaction says everything.

The fickleness of the crowd is the obvious point. But there must have also been real celebration – if Zacchaeus was there, or those Jesus had healed. I wonder if the widow with her one coin in her purse was there, thinking Jesus wouldn't notice someone like her. I wonder if the woman who poured expensive ointment on Jesus' feet was following him clutching her jar, wondering if she would ever get a chance to use it. I wonder what Judas was thinking as he followed this strange procession into Jerusalem. Was he excited, hopeful, optimistic for a rebellion, or did he see it as a sham?

It seems to me that Palm Sunday confronts us with the presence of the person of Jesus. And our expectations of him and our images of him face the reality of him.

Is there a part of us that is threatened by his strong but gentle unwavering presence?

Is there a part of us that is ashamed when faced by his purity?

Is there a part of us that is disappointed by the expectations we harbour that have never been fulfilled?

Is there a part of us that is fearful of following someone with such sense of purpose?

Is there a part of us that is afraid of being identified as the follower of someone the powers of this world chose to execute?

Palm Sunday is a paradox. We sing joyful songs to echo the crowd, but lurking under the surface is something much more challenging – the exposure of what is true. On Good Friday for the penitent thief, that facing up to truth was salvation. For others, it would be rejection. For Saul to become Paul, it would be both.

As we celebrate this day, and enter Holy Week, that question remains for us. Is Jesus, the Light of the World, one who draws us, or is the light so frightening, that we seek refuge and shade?

True and humble king,
hailed by the crowd as Messiah:
grant us the faith to know you and love you,
that we may be found beside you
on the way of the cross,
which is the path of glory. Amen.