

PALM SUNDAY 2006

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Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 31: 9-16; Phillipians: 2 5-11; Mark: 11 1-10

Today on this Palm Sunday (PS) we stand with Jesus at the start of a week that changed the course of Israel's history. It changed the course of all human history and shook the universe.

What is called 'The triumphal entry into Jerusalem' and is recorded in all 4 gospels, marks new phase, last phase of Christ's ministry which all takes place in Jerusalem from now on. One of the distinctive characteristics of this incident is joy. What one commentator described as "a singular, remarkable, and exquisite joy that is at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian story and at the centre of the life of faith." At times this joy simply cannot be contained. It has to break out as it does among the crowds greeting Jesus:

"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!"

However it is manifest, joy is a strange blend of satisfaction or fulfillment and anticipation at the same time. The story of Palm Sunday is a witness to this joy. It is the story of Israel's joy at seeing God breaking into the world, into people's daily lives and doing a new thing.

This is one of events in life of Christ, one of passages of scripture that many of us know so well that we may be in danger of becoming indifferent to it, perhaps unmoved by it. I want to make two points about the Mark 11 Gospel reading before moving onto interacting with it in a slightly different way.

A deliberate act

There were many times in Jesus' ministry when he tried not to draw authorities' attention to himself, tried to avoid confrontation so as to be able to continue his preaching, healing, teaching ministry. For example, he told people he healed like the deaf mute in Mark 7 and the blind man in Bethsaida in Mark 8 not to tell anyone what he had done.

That is not the case here. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a deliberate and purposeful act of provocation. Jesus does what he does the way he does it deliberately and purposefully. He knows it will provoke the Jewish leaders to take action against him. He knows the time is right for his ministry to start to move towards its climax. He deliberately uses actions and symbols associated with royalty, the line of King David and with the Messiah. He offers himself as Messiah and inaugurates the events of Passion Week. For example, David and Solomon rode on a colt and the Mt of Olives was

expected by some to be the site of the coming of God. Jesus' action echoes the words of the prophet Zech (9:9) which John records (12:15):

'Do not be afraid oh daughter of Zion,
see your king is coming
seated on a donkey's colt.'

Many people respond in kind, with great joy, shouting traditional praises like those of Psalm 118, laying down their cloaks and branches cut from trees including palms. One source suggests that the use of palms to commemorate Christ's entry into Jerusalem. on this day was established in Jerusalem in the 4th Century when Cyril was Bishop. Palm branches were also used at the Feast of the Tabernacles, so there is historical precedent for this way of expressing praise and joy.

What kind of Messiah?

Although Jesus clearly offers himself as the Messiah, the style of Saviour he presents is different from the expectations current at the time. This is the second point I want to make. The Jews were waiting for a Messiah to deliver them from their Roman rulers. They expected a political, or nationalist leader, perhaps a violent social reformer to restore Israel to its former glory. This accounts for some of the people's joy in greeting Jesus. It is also why he had been careful all through his ministry not to allow himself to be forced into a mould. He had feared that people would misunderstand him if he claimed to be the Messiah, God's anointed one. He consistently countered people's expectation with the Gospel, with kingdom values, kingdom ways of being and doing. He presented a picture of the peaceful king described in Zech 9:9.

In this event, there are probably 4 major groups of people involved. In addition to Jesus there are

Disciples

These were Christ's faithful followers, who had been with him, lived with him, learned from him and exercised ministry under his supervision. They, of all the people who witnessed Jesus' entry into Jer. probably grasped its significance and understood the divine authority that Jesus was claiming for himself by it. Theirs was probably the greatest joy and the loudest praise. But, as subsequent events of Holy Week and Easter demonstrated, they did not grasp the whole truth. Scripture was written with the 20/20 vision of hindsight and it was only after the fact that people understood the full significance of the Jesus story.

Lazarus group

Then there was a group of people I'd like to call the Lazarus group. People who knew about Christ and his ministry. Scripture records (v 6) that Jesus went through Bethany and Bethphage and it is thought that he probably spent the Sabbath with Lazarus and his family. John's gospel suggests (12: 17) that in the crowd following Jesus there were people who had been present when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. People who

knew about Jesus, what he had done and perhaps believed in him but were not as close as disciples. People whose joy was real.

Bystanders

As with most events recorded in the gospels there would also have been bystanders or observers like the people who ask the disciples what they are doing with the colt. People who were probably neutral towards Jesus, watching, listening, interested but not involved.

Pharisees

Then, John's gospel records, there were the Pharisees (12: 19). Men who were definitely not positively disposed to Christ nor joyous at his coming. To them he was an upstart, illegitimate carpenter from Bethlehem who was upsetting the status quo, challenging their teaching, stirring up the people and turning Judaism on its head. These men were certainly not among the joyful crowds waving branches and crying 'Hosanna to the king of David'. They were more likely to be skulking in the shadows muttering among themselves and plotting to get rid of Jesus.

Because many of us are so familiar with this passage I want to take a different approach now and use a strategy employed in interactive BS. I want to ask the question "How does this Jesus and his story intersect with me and my story?" To do this, let's think about the four groups of people identified and how they relate to Jesus. Where do we fit in? With which group do you most closely identify at the moment? At different times and under different circumstances we probably all identify with every group, perhaps with two at the same time! But today, here and now on Palm Sunday with which group do you identify and why?

As we move into HW with its momentous events leading to Good Friday and Easter, let us spend a few minutes reflecting on where we stand in relation to this Messiah, where and how he may be calling us. Put some questions up on the o/h may be helpful or HS may have other questions for you.

The Messiah and me

Disciples

Have you grasped the full significance of the Jesus story for you?
What new thing does God want to do in your life?

Lazarus Group

Why are you following Jesus?
What do you want from him?

Bystanders

How do you feel about Jesus?
What are you going to do about him?

Pharisees

Why are you angry with Jesus?

What are you going to do about him?

Conclusion

In the events that we will commemorate this week starting today with PS, God demonstrated the eternal dimensions of divine love. The hour of decision has come for Israel. God's hour of decision about Israel and Israel's hour of decision about God. Israel's future depends on how it receives its promised Messiah who comes today riding on a colt hailed with shouts of praise. The hour of decision comes for us too when we too are confronted with Jesus the Messiah.

Along with the joy of this day, there is a note of sadness that runs through the subsequent chapters of Mark's gospel because he knows the story will end with Israel's rejection of the Messiah. This rejection will in turn bring judgement. So as we stand on this PS among the disciples, the Lazarus group the bystanders or the Pharisees and go with them through HW to Easter, that is the question that faces all of us. "How will we respond to the promised Messiah?" Will we accept and believe or reject and bring judgement on ourselves just as Israel did? Will we share in the joy or will sadness be the dominant theme for us?

"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!"

Are we able to share in those praises?

AMEN