

The Servant King

Reading: Mark 11: 1 – 11.

Well we are reflecting on the events of that first Palm Sunday – and what a day that was. A day filled with such intense and highly charged emotion. And so I'd like to start with some scene setting and then look at something of what these events might be saying to us today. And I shall largely be following Mark's account as that's the set reading for today but filling in some of the details from the parallel accounts in the other gospels.

And so it's Passover time and thousands of pilgrims are making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast and the hot topic of debate amongst them along the way is whether Jesus will be coming to the Feast: "have you seen Jesus on the road?" many were asking. Some said they'd seen him but it seems only a few of them had. But then someone pipes up saying "Oh! I saw him yesterday back in Jericho. And you know that blind guy who usually sits begging just outside the city – Bartimaeus I think they call him – well he can see now. I was there when Jesus asked for him to be brought over to him over and he healed him." And then someone else chips in. "Yes, I was in Jericho too yesterday and you know that small chap, Zacchaeus who runs the tax racket down there, well Jesus went to stay at his home. I was talking to some locals just before I left and they say he's completely changed, he's even giving people their money back!"

And so why was all this such a hot topic of conversation. Well it seems there were many in the land who wanted Jesus to be their king, especially up in the north where he was really popular. There'd been an occasion not all that long before when he'd miraculously fed 5000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. And it had had such an impact that those who were there tried to make him King by force. But Jesus refused and was able to slip away to a quiet place before they knew where he'd gone.

Yes, they wanted Jesus as their King and Jesus is indeed a king - but not the sort of king, most of the people were thinking of. They were looking for a warrior king who would liberate them from their Roman overlords. But that's not what Jesus was about. He comes as the servant king - one who comes to seek and save those who are lost. – A king who identifies with the suffering servant of Isaiah, the one who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, a king who comes offering something very different and far deeper and greater than what the crowds think they were looking for.

And the reason why it's such a burning issue for those on the road, is that for hundreds of years the people of the land had had a very sad history of their little country. It seemed as though forever it had been overrun by foreign powers and was presently under Roman occupation. They were just fed up with others ruling them and telling them what to do.

And the people constantly looked back to the golden age of the great King David. A time when the nation enjoyed a time of peace, prosperity and security but it had never been the same since. And a dream had been passed down from generation to generation that one day – one day, a king would once again sit on David's throne. It was written in their Scriptures that one day the Messiah would come. But in the meantime the people kept the dream alive and lived for the day when they would have their own land to themselves again.

Well Jesus was coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. He and his disciples had been on the road over the last few days. And having passed through Jericho they were now staying at the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary in Bethany on the Eastern slope of the Mount of Olives not far from the city.

Well let's move on now to the following day and Jesus asks two of his disciples to go to a nearby village where they will find donkey or colt as it says in the text. "Untie it and bring it back" he says, "if anyone asks what you are doing say the Master needs him." And that's exactly what happens. Some of those standing around the animal ask "what are you doing with that colt?" And the disciples respond in just the way, Jesus asks them to and the people allow them to take it away with them.

And as the two men return bringing the colt with them, Jesus makes it clear that he is going to ride into Jerusalem. And straight away the disciples know this is going to be something really special as Jesus never rides, he always walks to wherever he's going. But you can see what the disciples are thinking. This is going to be it – Jesus is now willing to declare himself as king - and he's going to do it in Jerusalem. The day they had waited a thousand years for had now come. And so they throw their cloaks over the colt and set off along the path that leads down from the side of the Mount of Olives singing songs of praise and victory.

And as this joyful procession comes over the crest of the hill and makes its way down on the other side, a crowd soon begins to gather. And probably a fair number of those in the crowd have been camping out on the hillside overnight. And that's not unusual as it's Passover and finding accommodation in the city at this time of year is pretty hopeless and so thousands have to find somewhere else to stay outside the city. And so as the whole company draws closer to the city, the bigger and noisier the crowd becomes. They're all going wild with excitement and some are spreading their cloaks across the road and others spreading branches they had cut in the fields nearby. And something like that only happens only when royalty is being welcomed.

And as we look at this crowd, it's difficult to make out just how much of this enthusiasm is superficial and how much of it is genuine devotion. It's probably a mix of both but you do get the sense that some of the things they are saying such as "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David" has quite a nationalistic tone about it.

Clearly some of those cheering Jesus on, still see him as some kind of warrior king who is going to set them free from the Romans. But then they are missing the point. Jesus had not come to fight the Romans. He is a king but not that sort of king. If he had come to drive out an occupying force, he would have chosen a war horse not a donkey to ride upon. He came to bring peace to a world that so desperately needed it. And if those cheering him had only understood their own Scriptures they would have seen what the Old Testament Prophet Zechariah had to say about it. This is what he says:

'Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

And as they approach the city some see what they think are tears of joy in Jesus' eyes but they're not - Jesus is crying, he's weeping, sobbing. He knows what awaits him on the other side of that city gate and he knows the crowd will soon turn against him. But it's the city he's weeping over as he loves this place, he loves these people and his heart aches for them as deep within he foresees that within a generation the city will be destroyed and become a smoking ruin. And that's what happened. And it was a sad consequence of the people's unwillingness to change direction and follow the way of peace. And a sad rejection of all that Jesus came to do and proclaim. 'He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him' says the Apostle John says in his gospel account.

And how do we see Jesus I wonder?

And the way that Mark tells the story is interesting as it takes an unexpected turn at this point. After the big build up and all the excitement it just seems to fizzle out with nothing happening – at least not that day – Jesus goes into the temple, takes a careful look around and then leaves and goes back to Bethany. And then Mark inserts a little phrase I’d never really noticed before. He says ‘as it was already late.’ And so what was Jesus late for? And this is what one Catholic writer says, and I’m paraphrasing his reflections a little.

What if this is about something more than just the time of day? What if Jesus is late getting somewhere or doing something? Maybe it’s because he was late in getting the colt back to its owner. If we look earlier in the passage the disciples who went to borrow the colt were told by Jesus that if anyone asked why they were taking it they were to say “the Master needs it and will return it soon.” And so maybe that’s why Jesus left the temple – it’s getting late and he needs to be true to himself and keep his word and return the colt to its owner.

He then goes on to say – What if the returning of the colt is a metaphor for us as we enter and walk through this Holy Week? What do we need to return this week? What do we need to return or let go of? We all have stuff that we’ve carried around with us for far too long - but it’s no longer able to take us anywhere or give us life. It’s just baggage we carry that continues to weigh us down. Maybe - maybe this Holy Week is the time for us to return and release it all to God, trusting that he can do something with it when we have never been able to? Amen

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon live streamed from St Laurence’s, Scalby on Palm Sunday 28th March 2021.