

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PALM SUNDAY ANTI-CLIMAX

25<sup>th</sup> March 2018

Mark 11:1-11

Philippians 2:1-11

In many Christian churches today is a day of celebration. In some places there will be processions with or without donkey. Palm branches are brought to church – in some places shipped in from a vast distance – and are waved while people get excited at the thought of this one time when Jesus was seen for who he was, God's Messiah coming to his people; the one who was hailed: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. The palm branches are taken home and kept in remembrance of the victory of Christ. In some other churches, and maybe more common in the UK, people are given palm crosses, crosses manufactured from dried palm leaves. These too are kept to remind people of Christ's victory, and the fact that it was won through the cross. Palm Sunday has long been seen as a great celebration, and the enthusiasm of the crowds that day has been contrasted with the equal enthusiasm of the crowds who called for Jesus' death a few days later.

And yet, was it really like that? Can we read Mark's account for what it says, without adding the accretions of art and tradition that have stuck to it over the years?

It begins with a bit of plotting and planning. Jesus has arranged in advance to get hold of this donkey. He knows what he is going to do, and he makes preparation. As we saw last week, Jesus thought long and hard about the prophecies which were to do with the work of God's coming servant, and some of these are found in the work of the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah spoke his prophecies after the return of the people from exile, when they were re-establishing their nation in their land. He has a great concern that they do this with justice and mercy, and in dependence on God. And in the midst of his practical advice he proclaims an oracle, which includes the well-known words:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
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. (Zech 9:9)*

The oracle goes on to say that God's coming king will be a bringer of peace, so that oppressed people can be freed.

Jesus knew that this, more than the other words of the prophet, the words about justice and mercy and peace, had become a rallying cry of those who espoused the nationalist sentiment, so closely tied to their faith, and who bitterly rued the presence of the Romans in the land. He knew that, and so deliberately he decided to enact the oracle. He arranged for the donkey, with code words and secret dealing – what he was going to do was dangerous, after all. It would be seen as a declaration of

anti-Roman sentiment and he didn't want those who helped him to get into trouble. His was the head which would be stuck above the parapet, as it were. So, he got his donkey and off he set.

And they made a procession. It was quite an amateur procession, really. Coats and branches on the road, and a man on a donkey. There were no marching bands, there were no symbols of military might. It was nothing compared to the processions of Roman soldiers which were a regular sight in the land, especially around Jerusalem. It was nothing compared to the processions that would have accompanied Pilate, wherever he went. It was amateur and it was rustic, the people who joined in and cheered were those who lived outside the city.

The urbanites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, are not to be seen in this account of what happened. It is those who lived outside the city, those who would be seen as maybe a bit simple, as maybe less important, as probably less well-off. The people at the edge of society, these least of this unimportant occupied Jewish nation were those who made the procession, who cut the branches and who blessed Jesus in the name of the Lord.

And in the end, it is a bit of anti-climax. Mark gives us no dispute with the religious leaders, as Luke does; and he gives us no picture of Jesus weeping over the city. But even if he had it would make no difference. What Jesus did was really anti-climactic. Jesus reaches Jerusalem, goes in, has a look at the temple; then turns on his heel and goes back to exactly where he had started out that morning – back to his base at Bethany. No doubt he returns the donkey, as promised. It was late. Maybe he had just been getting his bearings in the city, to which he will return in a more conventional way the next day, but for those who had risked shouting in his favour, it must have been a bit of a let down. They weren't shouting for this. They expected to see some action.

What must that have been like for those who saw Jesus as the great deliverer? If it was you, might you find yourself slipping away from Jesus, being a little more cynical? It is like election time: a promise and no delivery. Is this what motivates Judas – because something does? Something shifts in him from putting his whole hope in Jesus. Maybe he begins to think, "Now if I could just force Jesus' hand..."

Jesus, of course, did it deliberately. He knew that there were rumours circulating about him, and expectations were being whispered. He knew that when the people questioned "Messiah?" they had certain expectations at the back of their minds. He knew that when they hailed him as the son of David, as the coming kingdom of David, they were looking back to a mythical golden age and their hope was to see it return again. And so, Jesus got that donkey and rode into the city, and took on their expectations, and then went home again. He needed the people to know that although yes, he was the son of David, and the Messiah long expected, and the kingdom – of God – was certainly what he was bringing, yet he wasn't who or what they thought that they had been looking for. And he wasn't going to dance to their tune or work to their expectations.

So he made his amateur procession, and if Pilate heard about it, he probably thought it was cute or comic, but certainly not a threat. He made his procession, he got the people to name their hopes – coming kingdom of David – and then he went home again. And when he returned to the city the next day, it was to do what *he* intended, not what was expected.

When he returned it was to cleanse the temple – to show that he had come, not to drive out the Romans, but to drive out the impurities in the understanding and worship of God. Impurities which had led to God's worship being a shorthand for something else, for national identity, not an end in itself. When he returned it was to engage the people, including the religious leaders – the religious leaders, not the Romans – in challenging conversation. It was to tell the parable of the vineyard and let people understand that they couldn't take God's vineyard for their own ends. It was to answer questions designed to trap him and to commend the widow who gave all she had to God.

And as that week went on his return to the city, and what he did and how he was received became the reason why it was necessary to warn his disciples about trials and persecutions to come, if they stayed with him. They could probably see the way that public opinion was going, but Jesus didn't want anyone to follow him under any false illusions. Maybe this was when Judas made up his mind, when his illusions were stripped away.

Palm Sunday as a day of triumph sits oddly, just before Good Friday, and as we come to the climax of the Lenten season of repentance. But Palm Sunday as an anti-climax may speak to all of us. For which of us never come to God with our own agendas? Which of us has never tried to steer God towards our own longings and hopes? In this day and age, how often is following Jesus seen as something of a therapy, something we can do which will make sense of our lives and answer our questions? It may be that we will find sense and clarity as we follow Jesus, but we may just as well find more questions. Because we are not called to follow Jesus for our own benefit, and he didn't come to sort out our own little lives and problems.

He came to be God's Messiah, to bring in the kingdom of God; and we are called to allow God to live in and through us. He came, not to give us blessings to clutch to ourselves, but to give us blessings to share with the world. That was why the temple needed cleansed – the Jews had forgotten their role in taking God's blessing to the world. That was why the parable of the vineyard had to be told, because God is not a cosy absent landlord who allows us to do as we will with his gifts, hoarding them to ourselves. He blesses so that we may bless.

Palm Sunday was Jesus' first decisive, deliberate step towards the cross. He knew that if he set himself up to be the one expected, then he would also disappoint and where that would lead. He knew that people would turn from him, if their own agendas were not going to be met, if they were asked instead to think about God's agenda, about the saving of the world. Judas turned away. The urban crowds of Jerusalemites were not impressed. The religious leaders were afraid and furious.

Why do you hail Jesus as Lord, as Saviour, as King? Why do you worship him as God and worship God through him? Maybe this Palm Sunday instead of making noise, we need to take some quiet to think about our motives and expectations, and later in the week, to lay these at the foot of the cross, ready and waiting for our own understanding and hopes to be put to death, so that we may know the resurrection of God's purposes and life on Easter Sunday. Amen.