

## Palm Sunday 2021

Readings: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29 & Mark 11:1-11

In our Lent journey we come to Palm Sunday, a very familiar story to those of us who have been Christians a long time,. I dare say we've all been presented with palm crosses or made them. Perhaps it is very appropriate that someone with the surname Palmer should be speaking on Palm Sunday. The surname Palmer is derived from the palms that early Christian pilgrims brought back to Europe from the Holy Land.

This morning, however, I want to look at the events of Palm Sunday from three angles:

1. The **build up** to the event
2. The **timing** of the event
3. The **significance** of the event

We have to understand the picture that Mark paints in his gospel and the timing of the event to understand fully it's significance. As Gordon Fee said "first and always first are the questions of context".

1) So we begin with **the build up** to the event.

Mark's gospel begins with these words "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ" (Mk. 1:1), in other words the good news about Jesus the Messiah. For the next ten chapters Mark builds a picture of the person and actions of Jesus the Messiah. One of the key themes is authority. The Messiah, God's anointed One, is the one who will bring in the kingdom of God and exercise the reign of God. And kingdom implies authority, the authority of the king. How then does Mark develop that theme of authority in Jesus' ministry?

Jesus **spoke with authority**. "I tell you", "Stretch out your hand", "Be quiet", "Take up your mat". Jesus spoke as one in authority. This is what surprised the people in the synagogue in Capernaum "they were amazed at his teaching, because He spoke as one who had authority" "I tell you".

He **exercised authority** over the demonic powers, over sickness, over disease, over physical disabilities and over storms.

He was always in control of events, he was not fazed or thrown off course by events. He even exercised the specific authority of God in forgiving sins.

Yet in all this, Jesus did not ascribe the title of Messiah to himself or allow demonic spirits to say who he was. We have to wait until Chapter 8 at Caesarea Philippi for the first declaration of Peter – "You are the Messiah", and even then, Jesus tells his disciples not to make that fact known. So Jesus is manifesting the authority of the Messiah but not wanting people to openly proclaim him as Israel's Messiah.

That is until Chapter 11, the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, where we see that Jesus is again totally in control of events – this whole procession into Jerusalem was carefully scripted by Jesus himself.

But there was something else about the ministry of Jesus that set him apart from the prophets who had gone before. The great cry of the Old Testament

prophets to the people of Israel was you have broken God's covenant that he made with you and forsaken his laws. Jesus never specifically mentioned the covenant God had made with his people, Israel. His message was "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15). The only time he uses the word covenant is at the Last Supper, when he brings in the new covenant, the new covenant that was foreseen by the prophets. Jeremiah described the new covenant in these words "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:33-34). Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God was a very different fulfilment of the Old Testament prophets than the nation of Israel was expecting. We'll return to this theme later.

2) So secondly, what was special about the **timing** of this event?

All Jewish men were obliged to go up to Jerusalem three times a year for the three pilgrim festivals – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Passover predated the law of Moses and celebrated the beginning of the people of Israel as a nation. Consequently it held a special place in the calendar. Jesus chose very deliberately to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey just before Passover. The timing was important, it was at the time when the pilgrims were assembling in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. The exodus was the founding story of the Jewish people; time and again the prophets and the Psalmists took them back to God's deliverance of the nation from the hand of Pharaoh by his sovereign intervention. This was their great deliverance story and this is what they were going to celebrate at Jerusalem at this time of Passover. Deliverance, liberty was the theme of the celebration and Jesus chose very specifically this time of Passover to declare his Messiahship to the nation. We are often surprised at the change in attitude of the crowd from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, but we must remember that the number of people in Jerusalem at Passover swelled from some 600,000 to 2 to 3 million, all in a very small geographical area, so it is not surprising that you could have several different crowds. You may wonder how the city could hold all these people, but many of the pilgrims camped outside the city on the hills or stayed in the nearby villages like Bethany and Bethphage.

3) Thirdly the significance of this event.

Significantly all four gospels choose to record this event. Pilgrims arrived from all over the known world and would arrive several days early to make sure they were ceremonially clean and to bring offerings to the Temple. Pilgrims usually walked the final stage of their journey to Jerusalem, but Jesus deliberately chose to ride a donkey down the Mount of Olives into the city of Jerusalem. Mark describes the animal as a colt, emphasising its age rather than its type. The gospels of Matthew and John tell us it was a donkey. To the Romans a king riding a donkey would have been ludicrous – kings rode war horses or chariots - perhaps that is why

this event did not apparently attract the attention of the Roman authorities. The whole triumphal procession was a way for the disciples to honour Jesus, both in what they did and what they said. Mark mentions that “no one had ever sat on the animal before”, a strange thing to highlight, or was it? Certainly it made the animal special, but there was a tradition that no one sat on the king’s animal other than the king. It also continues the theme in the life of Jesus – a borrowed stable, a borrowed boat, a borrowed donkey, a borrowed tomb, this king was different. The disciples threw some outer garments on the donkey to provide a makeshift saddle for Jesus while others spread their garments on the road. The spreading of garments before a notable figure was known both in the Greco-Roman world and also in the story of Jehu (2 Kings 9:13). So the manner of his arrival spoke of someone exalted. But it is also important to hear what the crowd said or sang. “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!” (Mk 11:9-10). Some of these phrases are quotations from Psalm 118 which we had in our OT reading. Psalm 118 is the last Hallel Psalm that will be said at Passover. Hosanna basically means “Save now”, although by the first century it had become more an expression of joy and jubilation. However, the whole of the acclamation of the crowd is Messianic. Luke tells us this was certainly how some of the Pharisees in the crowd heard it when they asked Jesus to stop them.

Unlike Matthew and John, Mark does not link this procession to the prophecy of Zechariah, but his description fits the prophecy well. Zechariah 9:9 says “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” All the ingredients foretold by Zechariah are there. It’s also interesting to see the reference to the kingdom of David in the shouts of the crowd. It was blind Bartimaeus at the end of the previous chapter who first addressed Jesus as Son of David. Interestingly a blind man saw what others did not.

But did the crowd and the disciples really understand what the Messiah was going to do or even the full significance of what they chanted? The disciples and the nation as a whole had this ingrained picture of the Messiah and what he was supposed to do and accomplish – rid them of the foreign Roman occupation, restore the kingdom to Israel so Israel would become top nation. But Jesus’ very clear words about him suffering (Mark 10:33-34) seemed to fall on deaf ears. It didn’t register with them, even when Jesus said it several times. They were more concerned about what positions they would have in the government when Jesus was installed as king. Why didn’t they comprehend what Jesus was saying? I believe it was because their preconceptions and deeply held beliefs prevented them from hearing what Jesus was so clearly saying. It’s very easy to look down on the disciples and be amazed why they didn’t grasp what Jesus was plainly saying. A bit like Captain Mannering in Dad’s Army – “stupid boy”. But humans can often be totally misled by their own preconceived and ingrained belief systems. Think of the aftermath of the Second World War, where disbelieving Germans were shown the horrors of the concentration camps and said Germans couldn’t do things like this. Or more recently, the very ingrained political beliefs of some Americans when it comes to polling day and its aftermath. And yet, how often do our preconceptions and

deeply held beliefs about the ministry of the church prevent us from hearing what Jesus is saying to us today? Remember the disciples knew their scriptures well and still missed what Jesus was saying.

The more I think about those early disciples the more I come to the conclusion that they were kept by God from understanding and believing what Jesus was saying about the suffering servant Messiah. Their eyes were only opened after the event, when Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:27).

Just think for a moment what it would have been like for the disciples to have grasped the full implications of what Jesus was talking about and then go through Holy Week? As it was they were just swept along by events. They had to totally rethink their understanding of God's purposes, they had to come to grips with a Messiah who suffered for the sins of the whole world. It was no longer just a Jewish covenant, God's new covenant was far bigger and all inclusive, for Jew and Gentile. Not only that, but all their understanding of the day of the Lord, when everything would be put right, had to be totally revised. Yes, Messiah came as foretold, but the bridegroom would go away and prepare a place for them before returning in glory. Christ would come once as the suffering servant and then return as the Lord of all. Their belief system was thrown upside down like the moneychangers' tables in the Temple. So maybe the disciples had an excuse for their blindness, perhaps we on the other hand do not.

Donald English gives these thoughtful words about the passage we are looking at, some of the dangers of being caught up with the crowd. He says "Mark helps us here about the distinction between enthusiasm and truth, and between group spirit and individual perception. .... group spirit can prevent us from making our own discoveries, and can hinder the truth from reaching the deepest areas of our personality. .... Mark's focus on Jesus as the only one who both enters the activities and perceives their significance is a reminder about the true nature of discipleship". (end quote).

The question Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi – who do you say I am? – still resonates down through the gospel narrative. It's the question we each have to answer for ourselves, we can't rely on others in the crowd or even in the church. "Who do **you** say Jesus is?"