

What kind of king? (Mark 11:1-11)

Why does Jesus matter? (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 16 March 2008

9.00am Palm Sunday Zec 9:9-13 Mk 11:1-11

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is just 14 miles. A half-day's journey, uphill all the way. The track would have been well worn for the pilgrims in the first century. Jews like Jesus and his followers had been travelling along it for centuries.

But this year would be special for all who made that journey and for everyone living in Jerusalem as well. This year the celebrations of their favourite feast would turn out in ways they could never have imagined. Well, that's not strictly true. They could have imagined what was happening, if only their eyes had been open to the events unfolding in front of them and their hearts tuned in to the true message of their holy scriptures.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is hard and dusty, uphill all the way. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem took Jesus and his followers to the town where his

friends Mary and Martha lived and where he had raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Bethany, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives is a natural place to stop and rest before the final ascent and the view of Jerusalem. Compared to so much of the countryside it was cool and shady because of the palm trees it was named after. We even have a picture of Bethany on the stained glass window here. It's the one where Lazarus is coming out in his graveclothes. So Bethany was where Jesus and his followers stopped before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They had time to draw breath and rest - at least most of them were allowed to rest. 2 got sent to get their master's personal transport - an unriden, unblemished colt. And then the story continues. But it's a story full of questions:

Why did Jesus ride on, ride on in majesty - as we sang earlier - why did he ride on into Jerusalem on a colt? Because King Solomon had done the same and Jesus was and is a greater king. Why a colt and not a horse? Because Jesus the King was coming in peace. What did the people shout? Hosanna to the Son of David. What did this mean? They recognised Jesus as

their king. What did the people do? They spread palm branches on the ground. What else did they do? They spread their cloaks on the ground. Why? Because laying their clothes before Jesus was a sign that they were laying down their lives to serve him and follow him. At least that's the way it should have been. But we know that the reality would be different.

What Jesus came to Jerusalem to do would change everything, not just for his followers then but also for us, for his followers now. We are Jesus' followers and today we will travel with him for those last few miles from the quiet shade of Bethany to the tumultuous shouts of Jerusalem and as we do so we'll be challenged to
by a perfect beast and the partial praise of the crowds as we prepare to remember and celebrate the perfect sacrifice Jesus made for our sins at the communion table.

Why was that colt such a perfect beast? What was so special about it? In the ancient Near East the donkey was not thought of as a lowly beast of burden, as we might think today. Kings (2 Sam. 16:1-2) and princes (Judg. 5:10; 10:4; 12:14),

preferred them as did leaders who mingled with the people in a peaceful manner (Gen. 49:11; 2 Sam. 19:26; 1 Kin. 1:33).

Saying that no one had ridden the animal does not mean that it hadn't been broken in and might difficult to ride; it could have been used to carry baggage. Mark's point in mentioning these details probably has to do with Jesus' honor: that is, the animal on which Jesus rode was not a common one; it was special. It had not been used before. In the OT animals or things were often reserved for special use (Num 19:2; Deut 21:3; 1 Sam 6:7). Jesus was a special king so he had to ride on a special beast. 1 Kings chapter 1 tells us how Solomon, the wisest of the Jewish kings and the son of their greatest king, King David rode into Jerusalem on a mule with priests and prophets and faithful soldiers in attendance. And how the crowds rejoiced then 'so that the ground shook with the sound.' (1 Kings 1:28). When the Pharisees told Jesus to stop people praising him, Jesus replied that if he did the stones would have to cry out. Our reading from Zechariah describes the entry of Yahweh's chosen king of

Jerusalem 'riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. Our reading from Zechariah also tells of a special king: not one who is a great in military or political sense but one who is 'righteous and having salvation and gentle'. Gentle is too gentle a translation for that last word. Other Bibles use humble or lowly (AV) to describe that king - words which fit Jesus perfectly. In Philippians Paul reminds us how Jesus humbled himself in obedience to God's will so that God could exalt him to the highest place. Jesus was and is the humble king. As his followers we should remember that and show humility in our lives too. That' doesn't mean riding on a donkey but it does mean a lot for our attitudes to other people. We've looked at the perfect beast, so let's listen to the partial praise now. The people are doing the right thing. You don't throw you coats on the ground in Israel because the ground is going to be hot and dusty. You don't cut branches off shade-giving trees either - unless someone really special is coming. The apocryphal books of the Maccabees describe a similar entry into Jerusalem around 200BC by the great Jewish hero Judas Maccabaeus who had just defeated

the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes. These books are not part of our Christian bibles but they can still give us a picture of what the Jews of Jesus' day knew about their history. So the people were doing the right things but as the events of Holy Week progress, we'll see that they couldn't keep it up.

Mark records different shouts of praise from the crowds: The first is "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" This is a direct reference to Psalm 118:25-26. In our NIVs we don't actually have 'hosanna' but 'O Lord save us' - which is what hosanna literally means. Ps. 118 was recited at the Feast of Tabernacles in the great Hallel (Psalms 113 to 118) in responses with the priest, accompanied by the waving of palm and willow branches. "The last day of the feast" was called "the great Hosanna"; the boughs used to make the booths people lived in also were called "hosannas". You didn't have to be particularly devout to shout hosanna, especially not at a religious festival. You could just be enthusiastic, taken up by the occasion. Taken seriously, 'hosanna' meant a lot: a shout of praise

and a prayer asking God for help but it could also just trip off the lips without any real personal meaning. It could easily be a partial praise and a partial prayer of the lips only without any commitment or even real belief in the one being prayed to. There's a reminder for us here, too: when we pray we should keep our hearts focussed on God and not just get our lips around the right phrases.

The next shout is "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!". This is a different shout. For the Jews of Jesus' day it was political as well as prophetic. Prophetic because it looked back to the great prophecies of scripture about the restoration of the David kingship and political because of the way many must have understood this as liberation from Roman oppression. Many were waiting for the Messiah to come and bring 'the consolation of Israel' but they were waiting for a political or military Messiah, not one who would save them from their sins once and for all. The same is true today. When people think of a Messiah, they're more likely to look to

Peel Holdings who will transform Wirral through a massive development on Birkenhead docks than to the churches of the area to point them to Jesus who can save their souls. At least that's the way Wirral MBC seems to view things! With this second shout, the people's praise was again partial praise. Is our praise partial or is it wholeheartedly directed at the only one who truly can transform - and save?

What about Jesus' response to this partial praise? Mark doesn't record any answer to the royal shouts or personal enthusiasm. Jesus doesn't give in to the temptation to be the one that they want and call on his 12 legions of angels to turf out both the Romans and the corrupt Jewish authorities. He doesn't give in to the temptation to let the cup of God's wrath and his own suffering to pass him by but he goes on riding the perfect beast, past the partial praise to offer himself as the full perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. And that is why we can be here today to remember and to celebrate what he did for us.

The crowd with their enthusiastic shouts of partial praise were right in ways they could never have imagined even if they were wrong in their expectation that Jesus was about to restore the fortunes of Jerusalem. They had half understood what was happening. A new king was coming, a king who was humble and just, who was bringing salvation to all those who were willing to accept him a king who today invites us to do just that: to accept him for who he is: the one who truly comes in the name of the Lord. As we move closer to communion, let us take up the challenge that puts to all of us as a congregation and to each of us as individuals to make our prayers and our praise whole hearted and not partial. "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" AMEN.