

Palm Sunday 2018

An abridged version From The Rev'd Elaine Farmer¹ with a few interpolations in the spoken version. Thank you Elaine for your inspiration.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage ... Jesus sent two disciples, saying ... 'Go into the village ...and ... you will find a donkey ... and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything ... just say ... "The Lord needs them."

Why did Jesus send for the donkey? This man didn't do anything just because; without thought; without purpose. He was a passionate driven man, as we will see during this week, and driven people don't do anything just because.

As he approached Jerusalem, Jesus would have been acutely conscious of how important this entry into Jerusalem was. He would have realised that the most likely outcome for him would be disaster and there was precious little time left to influence the people for his cause—the kingdom of God. To do that, he had to remind them of who they were, of their history, of the stories of their tradition, of their god, and what God required of them as people of faith. And he had to do it decisively and quickly.

Mark says there were many people there, and a procession of sorts seems to have formed up around Jesus as he approached the city. Dusty and ragged no doubt, but a ripple of excitement running through the people—the kind of 'what's happening?' excitement that the shout of just a few can stir in a crowd.

It was as if a stage was set. The situation was full of meaning to serve Jesus' cause. Fresh in the memories of all of them, including Jesus, would have been the new year Festival of Tabernacles—or Booths—just past. This was Sukkôth, the most important of the three annual pilgrimages to the sanctuary, and for them it meant tales in their scriptures of a week of joyful feasting, of thanksgiving for Yahweh's rescuing them from their desert wanderings. And the blessing of a successful harvest—another year's supply of bread and wine for their sustenance and comfort.

Sukkôth in turn would revive memories of their great ancestors, Moses and David, and of Israel's past glory. Of the story of the

¹ <http://sjks.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Holy-Week-Easter-2011-sermons-complete.pdf>

wonderful procession when the ark and the tabernacle Moses had built for it were carried by the priests to great King Solomon's beautiful new Temple. King and people had led the way moistening the ground with sacrifices and drink offerings, sweetening the air with pungent clouds of incense, singing and dancing in endless praise to the glory of God. Perhaps, in their own time, many in the crowd with Jesus had been pilgrims to the festival at the great Jerusalem Temple. Perhaps, like their ancestors, they had bound together branches of willow, myrtle and palm to wave over their heads as the priests processed round the altar, branches in hand, pouring silver bowls of water and wine upon ground and altar. Together they would have sung the great Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

And they sang it now; joyfully; sensing triumph in the air. This was the man everyone was talking about. Some of them had even seen the amazing things he had done. Here he was, riding a donkey and heading towards Jerusalem. They remembered other things their scriptures said. The great prophet Zechariah proclaiming to their ancestors:

'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.'

Was this Jesus that king?

The question flashed through the crowd.

And would this Jesus drive the hated Romans out of Israel?

Would peace, longed-for peace, reign?

They waved their branches high, spread their cloaks and branches on the ground in front of Jesus on his donkey, and followed him towards Jerusalem—willing it all to be true. Wanting him to be the one to make their dreams of freedom and glory come true.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Jerusalem, approaching from the west, was another procession; a very different procession. Here there were no downtrodden peasants dreaming of past glory. Here was power and might and glory now. Roman power and Roman glory. This was a procession of soldiers and cavalry accompanying Pontius Pilate, Governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria—the

presence of Rome, the voice of Caesar—to Jerusalem. He was coming from the coastal town of Caesarea Maritima where he and other governors before him, and after, lived. With modern splendours and cooling sea breezes, it was much more pleasant than the inland city of Jerusalem with its dust and heat and surly provincial people. But while Jerusalem was not the residence of choice for Rome's governors, this is where they always came when major Jewish festivals were held; particularly the Passover—a dangerous time when these troublesome Jewish subjects celebrated their liberation in another age from another ruling emperor—Egypt's Pharaoh.

So Rome came to Jerusalem to reinforce the city's garrisons and show its muscle. No humble donkeys here but high, elegantly prancing horses, their proud riders sitting tall and secure in their power. Here were fluttering banners, golden eagles on poles, armour, weapons, and jingling bridles; sun glinting from metal and gold; clouds of dust rising from stamping feet; the beat of drums and about it all warning and threat. Here were no shouting joyful crowds but silent bystanders, wary, clutching their children to them; some awed perhaps - many resentful. All of them sniffing danger in the air and understanding all too well the meaning of this imperial display—make no trouble and you'll get none—and hoping they could believe it.

From the east and from the west the two processions entered Jerusalem and moved towards its heart—the Temple—and towards each other. They represented everything that was 'opposite'. And their meeting could only lead to bloodshed and death. For the politics of Jesus and the politics of Rome meant a clash between non-violence and violence, between the power of powerlessness and the might of the sword. But there was more to this clash than politics. This was also about theology. A meeting between these two processions meant a clash between the kingdom of God and the self-proclaimed divinity of Rome's emperors.

All the descendants of Caesar Augustus, himself recognised as son of the god Apollo, were called 'lord' and 'saviour', including Tiberius, emperor when Jesus was wandering Judea, preaching about the kingdom of God and earning a reputation as a dangerous troublemaker for Rome.

These two processions are at the heart of everything that happens this week, of everything that leads to the crucifixion.

Why did Jesus do it?

What drove him to dangerous action that invited the most horrible death?

What drove him to stare down the might of Rome that was ready—and able—to swat him like a fly as soon as blink?

It was because of Jesus' Passion for the kingdom of God, for bringing about the justice of God. He wanted to recall people to their faith in Yahweh, their God. These are the passions of Jesus—justice, mercy, compassion, humility, following the prophet Micah's words—these are the keys to understanding why he died as he did that first Good Friday. They are the links between his life and ministry, and his death. Without those passions, the passion of Christ on the cross becomes just another bloody death, a death without meaning for all the world's tomorrows.

And so this day, Palm Sunday, we stand between these two processions, one of might and circumstance, the other of humility and powerlessness.

Which procession will we follow? Of course, we know what our answer is supposed to be: that we will follow Jesus, holding our palm fronds high and shouting with the crowds, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'

But we also know that, instead, by week's end, we will have flung our palm fronds away and raced to wave the banners and golden poles of worldly power, crying out 'Crucify him!'. We will have turned our backs on Jesus riding his little donkey clip-clopping his way to death.

Which procession will we follow?

Which one have we already joined?