

Palm Sunday 2021: God's new normal

St. Brandon's

Zechariah 9:9-12; Ps 118:1-2,19-end; Mark 11:1-11

28 March 2021

"I have almost reached the conclusion that the ... great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is ... the moderate white [Christian] who is more devoted to order than to justice ...".

I wonder if you know where that quote comes from. And I wonder if you can make any connection between that and Palm Sunday. Don't worry - all will be revealed!

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday was very obviously a staged event. There had been previous occasions when a crowd had tried to make Jesus king by force, and He had resisted (e.g. John 6:15). But now it is Jesus Himself who takes the initiative. Clearly, the donkey (Mark and Luke call it a colt, but Matthew and John are explicit about it being a donkey) has been lined up. Clearly, the route from Bethphage and Bethany, from the desert side of Jerusalem from where a Messiah was expected to come, was planned. Clearly, His entry was designed to fulfil the prophecy in Zechariah which we had as our first reading: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey". Clearly, the timing was deliberate – it was Passover time, freedom time; "the time when Passover dreams, the great hope of freedom, of God's sovereign and saving presence being revealed in a quite new way, would at last come true".¹ And there would have been lots of people in Jerusalem for the festival – not quite 'rent-a-crowd', but a ready audience at least.

So, a staged event, and if there was any spontaneity, it came from the crowd spreading their cloaks, spreading leafy branches cut from the fields, and shouting the great cry, taken from our Psalm this morning, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord", (a psalm they would have been singing anyway as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival), together with "Hosanna" – a cry that mixed exuberant praise with a prayer that God would save His people, and do so right away. That's what 'Hosanna' means.

So in what way was Jesus, having deliberately set this all up, answering that prayer that God would save His people, and do so right away? Well, in two ways because He was simultaneously making a religious statement and a political statement, along the lines of "the coming kingdom of our ancestor David" as the crowd said, since David and other kings in the OT combined both religious and political authority. In the same way, but in a much greater way, yet also in a different way Jesus was coming as 'Messiah-king'.

So let's look at these two in turn, starting with the political statement that Jesus was making. Yes, He is a king, but not the kind of king the crowd, or the Roman authorities, were expecting. He comes humbly riding on a donkey, not belligerently riding on a war horse. He comes to "command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" as it says in our Zechariah reading. In other words, He is not claiming to be just 'king of the Jews' but of the whole world. And, if we follow the raging of the OT prophets against injustice, He comes to bring justice as well as peace. In relation to the nationalistic desire to see off the Romans, as the enemy

¹ It's not explicit in Mark that it is Passover; the idea and quote is taken from Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001, P.146-7.

who the Jews wanted rid of, well He had commanded that we should love our enemies, that we should go the extra mile when required to go one mile by a Roman soldier.

As Jesus said to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not from this world', but that did not mean that it was not a kingdom *for* this world – otherwise why would He instruct us to pray 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'? If politics is about working out how best we live our common lives together, then what Jesus was establishing was, to use the current terminology, God's new normal, a normal of peace and justice across all peoples, to be realised in our common lives together. It's in that sense that He would 'save His people (all of them), and do so right away'.

What then of the religious statement Jesus was making? Well, He is claiming to be the long-awaited Messiah, but again not quite the kind of Messiah the Jews were expecting, even though they should have known better. For this is a Messiah who fulfils the role of the suffering servant that Isaiah had prophesied, who suffers and dies for His people, a Messiah who has already prophesied that when He was lifted up from the earth He would draw all people to Himself (John 12:32), as we heard last week. This is a Messiah who, beyond that, overcomes the grave and rises again, bringing the promise of eternal life. This is a Messiah who ascends to heaven to lift our humanity to the heights of His throne. And, this is a Messiah who preaches and enacts in Himself, love as the fulfilment of the law, and who, in His interactions with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter He heals (Mark 7:24-30), the Roman Centurion whose servant He heals (Matt. 8:5-13), and in the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), makes it clear that He is the Messiah for all peoples not just the Jews. Jesus was, again to use the current terminology, establishing God's new normal, to be realised in the here and now, even if its ultimate fulfilment will be beyond time and beyond this world. It's in that sense that He would 'save His people (all of them), and do so right away'.

So Jesus, as He entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, was deliberately making these astonishing statements and claims as the Messiah-king, with the clear expectation that they would establish God's new normal for the world right away. 2,000 years later, how do we and the world match up?

Well, as you'll have realised, I've used the current term 'new normal' deliberately, since that's the way we've been speaking of what we want the world to become like as, one year on from the first lockdown, we emerge gradually, and probably in halting stages, from the grips of the pandemic. But how do our ideas of what the new normal will be like match up to God's new normal?

A recent survey by the BBC and King's College London,² found people expected to do more walking and cycling, more home working and less commuting, more local shopping, less flying and more talking to family. All well and good – these are surely, mostly and potentially, in line with God's new normal, and we should embrace and celebrate them. In the same survey, 70% of respondents said that health workers should receive more financial support than before the pandemic, and for low-paid workers the figure was 62%, social care workers 58% and homeless people 53%. In each case, a majority in favour of a more equal and more just society that seems to be in line with God's new normal. Again, we should embrace them, and do what we can to help them become a reality.

² [Covid: More walking and family chats post-lockdown - poll suggests - BBC News](#)

But, as we look more widely at a world of violence, wars, famines, exploitation of minorities and so on, that still leaves us a very long way from God's new normal. Let me take climate change as just one, but clearly a major, challenge that we have to grapple with. The International Energy Agency has calculated that in 2020 carbon emissions dropped by 5.8% compared with 2019.³ Just 5.8% despite the calamitous effects on economic activity of the pandemic. We need to see at least that level of reduction year-on-year-on-year if we are to avoid a global calamity which would put the pandemic in the shade. We as Christians are called upon "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth", to quote the fifth mark of mission of the CofE. What can we do, individually and as a church, to establish God's new normal in that regard?

Let me take one final example. A number of us have been studying the Diocesan Lent course on racial justice and, of course, we had the Rev Steve Muneza as our preacher a few weeks ago as part of that. He spoke of how racism is itself like a virus that infects the person who has it and affects its victims. He called on us to encounter God in the face of the stranger. He spoke of the gaps we need to be mindful of, particularly in relation to the structures in society and institutions that need to be dismantled. For those of us who have done the course, it has been a challenging experience as we have tried to grapple with these issues, and how we might respond.

But that takes me back to the quotation I began with: "I have almost reached the conclusion that the ... great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is ... the moderate white [Christian] who is more devoted to order than to justice ...". Those words were from Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'⁴ (that's Birmingham, Alabama) which he wrote just months before his 'I have a dream' speech. He wasn't just addressing Christians, however. That part of the letter ran like this:

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

April 1963. 58 years ago. A lot has changed. A lot remains the same. And the challenge to me, in relation to the bringing in of God's new normal in all the areas I've described and more, is whether I am really (just?, still?), a moderate white Christian.

Amen

³ [Global Energy Review: CO2 Emissions in 2020 – Analysis - IEA](#)

⁴ [Letter from Birmingham Jail, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. \(letterfromjail.com\)](#)