

## Palm Sunday

St Brandon's

Mark 11: 1-11

24 March 2024

Historical, political, radical. Three words for a three point sermon! Jesus's actions on this first Palm Sunday were historical in that they built on and fulfilled prophecies and expectations in Israel's history. They were political, not in the party political sense, but in the sense of challenging the way society and, indeed, religion were organised. And they were radical in that the alternative they offered was different from what perhaps everyone expected.

And all that without saying a word. Apart from the initial instructions about the donkey, Jesus, the Word of God, is silent. But here, as with His passion, death and resurrection, His actions speak louder than words.

To explore further what historical, political and radical mean, we'll need to draw not only on Mark's version of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but also Matthew's and Luke's, and some bits of John's gospel and Isaiah besides. The three synoptic gospels give very similar accounts, but have a few differences that are important in getting the full picture. So, for example, it's Matthew's account (21: 4-5) that first introduces the historical element. Matthew says of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey: "This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet [the prophet being Zechariah in our OT], saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, look your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey' [9: 9]".

So, there was an expectation from Israel's history that an event of this nature would take place. And, indeed, it was understood that this king, this Messiah, would appear from the Mount of Olives, as all three synoptic gospels tell us that Jesus did. So, probably for many in the crowds swarming into Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, what Jesus was doing would have triggered memories, echoes from their past. 'Ah! Something significant may just be happening here. This Jesus, who we've heard of, this prophet from Nazareth in Galilee (as Matthew's version tells us the crowds explain to anyone who doesn't know – 21: 11), might he just be fulfilling these ancient prophecies?'

We can judge that something like that must have been happening because of the reaction of the crowd. Why did they throw their cloaks on the donkey and on the road? Why did they spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields? Why did they shout out, "Hosanna! [Save us] Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!". How did they know that this was the appropriate response to what they saw happening before their very eyes?

And the answer is, again, historical. This is what their scriptures, our OT, told them to do. There was the annual Festival of Booths, where they would cut branches to bring with them to make temporary dwellings to inhabit during the seven days of that festival, and as they made their way up to Jerusalem with their branches, they would sing 'praise God' psalms – our Psalms 113-118, the last of which (118: 25-26) contained the basis of the words they shouted in celebration of Jesus's triumphal entry. This may have been Passover rather than the Festival of Booths, but

perhaps they sensed that this was the occasion when the old prophecies were being fulfilled. And they knew their part, they knew their lines in the drama, they knew their history.

So, first Jesus's entry into Jerusalem was historical, fulfilling both in Jesus's actions and the crowd's reactions the ancient prophecies.

But then it was also political. How could it not be when a *king's* entrance was being proclaimed? How could it not be when part of what the crowds shouted was, "Blessed is the coming *kingdom* of our ancestor David!"? Jesus was entering the holy city, the abode of the chief priests and elders, and the site of the central Roman administration, the residence of the Roman governor — the whole scene was politically charged and controversial. This was an open and deliberate assertion of Jesus's Messiahship. How could it not be, and be very clearly seen to be, a challenge to both the religious and secular authorities?

No wonder, in Luke's version, some of the Pharisees in the crowd told Jesus to order His disciples to stop. Quite probably, they were not only indignant at the challenge to religious authority that Jesus's actions implied, but also fearful of the political consequences when the Romans realised the challenge to their authority that Jesus's actions and the crowd's reactions represented.

And it's quite possible that some at least in the crowd also interpreted this politically — they were, after all, proclaiming a king and a kingdom, a Davidic messiah who would save them from oppression. Perhaps this might turn into a coup, perhaps the Romans might just be thrown out. But, for any who thought that way, they had got their history wrong, as we shall see. And yet, Jesus's action was political in the sense that politics is about how best do we organise our common life together, and how best might we be governed in order to achieve that? But Jesus's answer to those political questions was radically different from what perhaps everyone was expecting.

First, of course, Jesus's triumphal entry was on a *borrowed* donkey — hardly a military conqueror on a magnificent war horse, but someone who was sufficiently impoverished in a material sense that He didn't even have His own very basic form of transport. And, as the quote from Zechariah told us, "look your king is coming to you, *humble* and mounted on a donkey". So, this was no ordinary king and no ordinary kingdom. As Jesus told Pilate in John's gospel, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (18: 36).

So, He was not denying that He was a king or that He had a kingdom, but He was actually making a much more radical and indeed universal claim: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* [or even *all things*] to myself", as He said in John's gospel (12: 32). And nor would this drawing of all people, all things, to Himself involve any military or violent action. Instead, He would, as Isaiah had already prophesied, be "named Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore" (9: 6-7).

That's a very different, very radical, and non-violent kind of king, who may well have been a disappointment to those who wanted someone to lead a little local coup to throw out the Romans, and who was a threat to both religious and secular authorities, but not in a way they might have anticipated. And it's a kingdom radically different from the kingdoms of this world, but a kingdom which, so Isaiah's prophecy tells us, will eventually encompass the whole world and for all time. That's no mean claim!

So, Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem was historical, political, and radical. But it was also 2,000 years ago, so an act way back in history. What of us? What's here for us now?

Well, we are, of course, the inheritors by faith of all of this. And, while it's history, it's also His Story (to make that well-worn point again), the story of Jesus the king, Jesus the Messiah. And as inheritors by faith of all of this, we find that we become part of His Story; that it becomes our story too.

And, so we should make sure, as far as we possibly can, that we have the history accurate. I criticised those who perhaps thought that Jesus might lead a coup for getting their history wrong; Jesus was never going to operate in that way, and indeed had much bigger plans for all people, all things, all time. In just the same way, we need to be sure, as inheritors of this story, that we get His Story right.

But secondly, this also tells us that Jesus was political, that His action in the world was of a very deliberate political nature, and so therefore should we be. But again, to emphasise that this was political in the sense that politics is about how best do we organise our common life together, and how best might we be governed in order to achieve that? So not party political except for us in supporting those parties and those policies which are in accord with the values of God's kingdom, and in challenging those parties and those policies which are not in accord with the values of God's kingdom. And we need to be politically astute in making those kinds of judgements.

And this, of course, gives the lie to those who say, 'Faith is a private matter. Keep it out of politics'. We have to say to such people that they don't know their history, that they have misunderstood the very nature of God who is, and demonstrates in Jesus that He is, intimately concerned with the way that we organise our common life together, and intimately concerned with how we are governed.

And, of course, this also says to us that we need to be on the side of and active in promoting the very radical ways of the Messiah: the Messiah who comes as the Prince of Peace; the Messiah who will establish and uphold His kingdom on the basis of justice and righteousness; the Messiah who has been doing this in history, is doing this now, and will continue to do this from this time on and for evermore.

We need to be historically accurate, politically astute, radically active.

Amen