

Palm Sunday

St Brandon's

Matthew 21:1-11

29 March 2026

Here's a question: in our first hymn we sang (six times), "To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring". Which biblical text might that be referring to? And to give you a clue, it's part of the story we're looking at this morning, though it occurs after the gospel passage we've just heard. Answer later.

A couple of weeks ago I was in London for a meeting of a charity that I chair. It's a Christian-based and ecumenical charity, and we always begin our meetings with a reflection and prayer. It was the turn of a Quaker to lead it, and she started by making reference to two 'Quaker meetings for worship for action' taking place in London that very day. The first was protesting at the recent Metropolitan Police raid on a non-violent direct action training session that had taken place at Westminster Quaker Meeting House. This was, you may recall, the second such raid. The other was as part of a mass lobby of Parliament, protesting at the reduction of civil liberties and the right to non-violent protest. (This, I think, was in relation to the Crime and Policing Bill which is going through Parliament, which would allow police to block protests that "may intimidate" worshippers "in the vicinity" of their place of worship. They haven't reckoned with our Palm Sunday procession, clearly!) The person leading the reflection said that, had she not been in our meeting, she would have attended both protests. Mmm. More on that later too.

Back to Palm Sunday and our gospel reading, although I want to start just before our passage. Before Jesus and His disciples had "come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage", they had been in Jericho. Jericho is about 12 miles from Jerusalem, east-north-east of it, in the Jordan Valley and just north of the Dead Sea. It was on the pilgrimage route to Jerusalem if you were coming from the north which included Galilee, and it was Passover time when our story occurs. So, it's likely that Jesus and His disciples were part of a large crowd making the pilgrimage journey from the north, via Jericho and up to Jerusalem.

And it definitely was up! Jericho is the lowest city in the world, 846 ft *below* sea level. Jerusalem, by contrast, is some 3,000 ft *above* sea level. So, this was roughly equivalent to climbing Ben Nevis, and when you got to the top of the Mount of Olives you got your first, glorious sight of Jerusalem itself. A kind of 'mountain-top' experience!

And so the geography only added to the sense of anticipation if you were on pilgrimage, and particularly at Passover time, because you would be looking forward to the great hope of freedom, of God's sovereign and saving presence being revealed in a quite new way. Perhaps this time? Perhaps this year?

So, when Jesus, already a well-known prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, borrowed donkeys (and note the simple reason to the owners – "the Lord needs them" – and the owners' presumably positive response to that), and then Jesus set off from the Mount of Olives, which is where the king, the Messiah, was expected to appear from, you can imagine the excitement in the crowd. Here was a prophet fulfilling that ancient prophecy from Zechariah (9:9): "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey". And more, it's likely that Jesus entered Jerusalem through the east gate (that was the direction He was coming from). And this was known

as the Golden Gate or the Gate of Mercy, and was linked to another messianic prophecy as the gate through which the anointed one, the Messiah, was expected to come (Ezekiel 44:1-3).

And the crowd knew their part in all of this: “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road”. And they chanted from one of the psalms they would sing on their regular pilgrimages – our Psalms 113-118, the last of which (118: 25-26) contained, as we heard, the basis of the words they shouted in celebration of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

But, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, was now claiming something more. Not just a prophet, but also a king. And a king was, of course, understood to be a political figure. So, what would this prophet-king do next? 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. How might He challenge both the religious and the political authorities?

In relation to kingship, it’s worth noting that 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 later 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, Jesus was not denying that He was a king or that He had a kingdom, but He was offering a model of a radically redefined kingship. And, through His own actions, riding on a donkey and entering in through the Gate of Mercy, and through the actions of the crowd, He was, in effect, offering a non-violent form of protest against what Rome stood for.

In relation to also being a prophet, as well as fulfilling prophecies as we’ve seen, it was what He did next that throws more light on this. Because, as you’ll probably know, Jesus then cleansed the Temple. And, as well as driving out those buying and selling and the money-changers, so reclaiming the Temple as a house of prayer, Matthew reports that the “blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them” (21:14). These were people who were normally excluded from the temple, but now Jesus received them, and blessed them by healing them.

And further, the children were “crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the son of David’” (21:15, an answer to my original question – did you get it right?). Children had got in there too, to the exasperation of the chief priests and scribes. But Jesus defended their right to be present: “have you never read”, He said to the chief priests and scribes, “‘out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” (21:16).

So, Jesus the prophet-king laid down challenges to both the religious and the secular authorities. And those same challenges then come down through the ages to us.

Do we, and how do we, maintain this house of God as a house of prayer? Who might we be tempted to exclude, and how might we welcome them in instead?

And, in relation to political power, how might we engage in non-violent direct action, as the Quakers were doing, when we see political decisions that seem to corrupt rather than support

our democracy? Good on the Americans who joined in the 'No king' protests against Donald Trump yesterday.

And, communally but also more personally, are we ready to put our property at God's disposal, as the owner of the donkeys did, even when the reasons may puzzle us? Are we ready to go out of our way to honour Him, finding in our own lives the equivalent of cloaks to spread on the road before Him, and branches to wave to make His coming into a real festival? Or have we so domesticated and trivialised our Christian commitment, our devotion to Jesus as our prophesying, that we look on Him simply as someone to help us through the various things we want to do anyway, someone to provide us with comforting religious experiences?¹

Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem asks awkward questions of us now, just as it did to the crowd and the religious and secular authorities of His own time.

Amen

¹ See Tom Wright, *Mark for everyone*, SPCK 2001, p.148, where he comments on the equivalent passage in Mark's gospel.