

Palm Sunday 2024

If you're organising a coronation parade, what do you need?

You need cheering crowds. You need soldiers, you need horses, preferably big strong war-horses. You need glittering swords, martial music, massed ranks of uniforms marching in step. You need everything about you to shout, the king is in town. Everything must shout *power*. Power is here.

Jesus has a donkey. He has cheering crowds too, admittedly, but that's pretty much it. There's Jesus, there's a rag-tag bunch of followers, and there's a donkey. Frankly, one reason why the Romans didn't crush Jesus there and then, why he still has a few days to live, might be that his entry into Jerusalem was so unimpressive. Perhaps the Romans didn't even notice. Very little about the first Palm Sunday shouted that power is here. Very little about it shouted at all.

However, we shouldn't take this low-key, almost parody of a royal parade as somehow meaning Jesus wasn't serious about who He claimed to be. Or think that he was not, after all, making a royal claim. In first century Israel, if you rode a colt into Jerusalem like the prophet Zechariah had said, you are claiming to be King. You let people wave palm branches around and call you 'Son of David' and shout 'Hosanna' - you are letting them acclaim you King. You might as well put the crown on your head.

So let nobody ever tell you that Jesus was modest. The claims he made for himself were *spectacular*. More, indeed, than any mere king could make. Let me take charge of the Temple, which is *my* house. Let *me* tell you what Moses should have said. I forgive you your sins. *I !* I and the Father are *one*. The next time someone tells you that they think Jesus was a great teacher and a wonderful example, but surely just an ordinary man, remember these words, and remember Palm Sunday. He thinks He's the King. And not just of Israel, but the King promised for the whole world, the one through whom God would reign, the one to usher in God's peace, God's justice. What crazy arrogance – unless, of course, it's true.

I wonder if the donkey knew it was true?

Sounds daft, I know, but think about it. A young colt, never ridden before, ridden now by a stranger, through a crowd of singing, dancing, cheering people, people pressing around it, surging down the road. All is noise and movement and energy. And that colt just walks, steadily, evenly, into Jerusalem. Never ridden before. Now, experts may want to dispute, but I suggest this is not usual colt-like behaviour. It would panic, it would buck, it would throw, any other rider. But not *this* one. Not the one for whom all things were made. Not the one whom even the animals, in their own humble way, recognise as their King, and in whom they find their rest. Palm Sunday is a story of the quiet, awesome, majesty of Jesus: his natural authority recognised by beast and crowd. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

And this authority is so supreme, so majestic, that it does not need the usual apparatus of power. When Pilate rode into Jerusalem, around the same time probably, he will have done it properly. He came with legions, standards, war-horses and swords. The idea was to impress, to overwhelm, to intimidate. Step out of line, the Empire says, and we will crush you. Look how big and strong we are, and tremble. Jesus, by contrast, comes armed with precisely nothing. He does not try to impress, let alone intimidate. His authority is so far beyond Pilate's, so effortlessly and infinitely superior to anything Rome or Caiaphas could come up with, that He does not need to *compete* with them. He will not *fight* his way into Jerusalem. His kingship will be established through utterly different means.

And maybe that accounts for what happens after our reading ends. True, Jesus goes to the Temple and casts out the money changers; he acts like the Temple is, as he said, '*my house*'. So far, so kingly. Reassuringly forceful. But then, he simply seems to give up. Just when he could have pressed the point, and led the people against their rulers, priestly and Roman, he leaves the city quietly and heads out again to Bethany. I suspect if we'd been there, and we were Jesus enthusiasts, we'd be standing with our palm branches bewildered. What's Jesus doing? Surely now is the time, at last, to do some smiting! The Revolution is meant to be starting now, Jesus - *right now*, look, our swords are ready! Lord? Lord? Where's he gone? Did anyone see where he went?

And maybe what's happening is that Jesus is saying, just pause. You've acclaimed me King, and you're right. I am the one you've been waiting for. I am everything you've hoped for. But you don't, as yet, have a clue. You don't understand what *my* Kingship looks like, what real Kingship looks like. But you will. You'll know it on Thursday, when I break bread and offer wine, when I kneel down to wash your feet. You'll know it on Friday, when they crown me and lift me up high. And you'll know it next Sunday, when everything changes, and a new world is born. But not yet. You've got to go through this week first, through these mysteries and come out the other side. Then you'll know. Then you'll rejoice. But for now: watch this.

And as for them, so for us. Of course, we've heard the Gospel before, of course we know what's coming. But it is so strange, so mysterious, that we need to watch this: to slow down, watch, and learn again. We need to keep Holy Week. Watch this. To live through Thursday and Friday. To come to church on Thursday and Friday, to pray through Thursday and Friday, to be silent and confused and overwhelmed on Thursday and Friday, before shouting for joy next Sunday. To learn once again what kind of King we have, and knowing that, to offer him once again the bended knee. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.