

Sermon

Palm Sunday: 10th April 2022

Followers and Foes

Luke 19:28-40; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

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Last week, I reviewed the lead up to this point through John's gospel chapters 9 - 12. As we looked at those accounts, it was notable that John told us several times that many were believing in Jesus.

Many followed him

When Jesus left Jerusalem after they had taken up stones to kill him, he went to the Jordan river region where many believed in him. He restored Lazarus to life. Many had come to visit Mary for the mourning but when they saw what Jesus had done, many put their faith in him.

After the dinner at Bethany, John told us that because of this miracle, many Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. And we hear in John's telling of the Triumphal Entry, that those who saw Lazarus come out of the tomb continued to tell others which drew a great crowd to meet Jesus as he entered Jerusalem.

So we can see that there was a considerable following over and above the twelve, the seventy and the wider band of established disciples.

The Colt

It is a physical significance for a leader to ride into a city on a donkey rather than a horse. A man on a donkey is hardly higher than a man standing, a donkey is not fast like a horse. A conquering king would want a horse or a chariot because they give a significant advantage over a foot soldier. This also gives status and physical dominance to a horseman. But Jesus rode a donkey. In fact not a mature donkey but an unbroken colt. There is an obvious signal of a peaceful entry. But what else is going on?

This action fulfils several prophecies.

To start with, a lot is made of untying the donkey. Being tied or untying it is mentioned five times. An interesting observation is that there is a prophecy over the tribe of Judah - Jesus' tribe. Jacob spoke blessings over each of his sons and for Judah he said:

Genesis 49:10-11 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

I wouldn't pretend this is plain, but it does seem to speak of a ruler from Judah with a universal reign, and this strange detail about tying a donkey and its colt to vine.

As to riding a donkey this does seem to be a mark of kingship in Israel. When David announced Solomon would succeed him as King, they put Solomon on his father mule and took him to be anointed. And all the people went up after him making music and rejoicing.

There is the passage from Zechariah 9:9-10 where he prophesied:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ... He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Surely Jesus' entry was a clear fulfilment of this prophecy and so an indicator that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem as the King of the Jews - the descendent of King David, the long awaited Messiah.

Now Luke doesn't mention the palms (so when we follow Luke it is non-Palm Sunday!) But he does record the disciples putting their garments on the donkey for Jesus to sit on and others laying their cloaks on the road before him. This is an honouring action. They are effectively laying out a red carpet before him and his donkey - a carpet made of their cloaks. This action too had precedent: when Jehu was made King, they spread their cloaks on the ground before him too.

The chant of the crowd walking with Jesus down the Mount of Olives to the Kidron Valley and up to Jerusalem was from the Psalm 118 we heard read. Pilgrims sang it walking to Jerusalem; it was sung at Passover every year. For people rejoicing that the Messiah had come and performed such miracles as they had seen, how significant to say:

118:23- 27 ... the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.

We say each week, 'Hosanna.' It is the Hebrew word from here which means 'save us now.' Here as the Psalm says they are walking with branches in hand in festal procession. Often Jesus said he was the light of the world and here they say his light has shone upon them.

They don't know it yet but they are taking the sacrifice to the altar - the true Passover lamb is coming into Jerusalem. Very few of them understand yet but they are walking beside Jesus - God incarnate saying, "You are my God, and I will give thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you."

They don't understand yet, but later the apostles will declare that Jesus is the stone the builders rejected who has become the capstone - the most important part of the building structure. The religious leaders rejected him, decided to arrest him, plotted to kill him.

But not all followed him

So we hear a Pharisee rebuke Jesus for what his followers were saying. Jesus' answer was, "If they were silent, the very stones would cry out!"

If you don't know what is meant in the New Testament, it is always worth checking for a quote from the Old Testament. There it is in Habakkuk 2:10-12:

You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it. "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!"

Similarly, God said to Cain that the ground cried out because he had shed his brother Abel's blood. This makes Jesus' response both an accusation of murderous intent (which was true) and also a statement that if people did not speak up for Jesus it would be an injustice. Failing to recognise who he is places us on the side of injustice.

We often think the crowd were very fickle cheering for Jesus on Sunday and braying for his death on Friday. However, I am inclined to think they were different groups. We have heard that many followed him but John also tells us that many others didn't and some leaders did believe but were afraid of persecution.

Most of Jesus followers would be from Galilee where he had mainly ministered. The crowd calling for his death may have been locals from Judea and Jerusalem. Besides that, those who supported Jesus may have been too frightened to attend the court or very disinclined to be connected not imagining they would have a decisive voice.

Conclusion

Dr David Garland wrote in his commentary:

The crowd shouts 'Hosanna! Save us!' thinking that Jesus has come to save them from their political enemies. What we need most is for him to save us from ourselves. Human nature and aspirations change little over the years, and this incident reveals that we still need saving from at least three things.

(1) We need to be saved from a petty nationalism that divides the world into tiny enclaves set over against each other. Jesus does not come to fulfil anyone's political agenda. ... The one who comes to Jerusalem comes as the king of the entire world and dies for all people. ...

(2) We must also be saved from a mercurial faith that abandons Jesus at the first sign of trouble. Jesus does not welcome throngs who will not pray with him in dark Gethsemane or go with him to an even darker Golgotha. He can little use those Christians who show up once a year when the cheering starts around Easter. He needs those who will endure to the end, even when faced with unspeakable suffering.

(3) We must be saved from foolish expectations of glory so that we can see God's power truly effected on the cross. God does not win by sending armies into bloody battles but by sending his Son to the cross. As a king who gives his life for others, Jesus reigns with a kind of power that earthly kings cannot match.

As we continue into Holy Week the letter to the Hebrews instructs us to pay attention to the suffering Jesus endured. Hebrews 12:2ff:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.