

Palm Sunday – Sermon on Mark 11: 8-11

Sisters and brothers,
it is an old tradition to journey through the passion stories on Palm Sunday, to remember Jesus' suffering and death.
But nevertheless it is only Palm Sunday today.
Still the crowd is cheering, celebrating as a king the man who will so cruelly die 5 days later...

The entry into Jerusalem, is a demonstration by the ordinary people for the long expected king of the poor.

They hadn't got a lot to cheer and shout about, the Jews:
controlled for centuries by a succession of powerful empires...
Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks – and now the Romans.
However dark the days had been, people still remembered the times of victory and freedom. Every April at Passover they remembered the greatest victory of all, the escape from Egypt, when God raised up Moses to lead them to freedom and the land of promise.
However dark times were, hope had not died. And once or twice a year it flared up into flame.
Of course at Passover the thought came: could this be the time when the Messiah would come to put an end to occupation and misery?
Could this be the time for the king of the poor?
The bringer of salvation and peace?
The person who'd fulfil the dreams of the prophets of old?

Mark's story of the entry into Jerusalem happens in the context of other stories. Jesus is healing people... That's what happened just before. Then he cleanses the temple and creates a conflict with scribes and pharisees.
Jesus comes to turn the world upside down.
Those who were without rights were given rights.
Those who didn't have a voice were set free to praise God...

Imagine the atmosphere among the pilgrims at the festival.
For many of them it was the visit of a life-time.
And when they walked towards Jerusalem the holy city sprang into view: beautiful in the sunshine. And then they began to sing...
Others could hear the singing in the distance and would join in and encourage them...

Then suddenly an unusual sight greeted them:
A group of people gathered round a man mounted on a donkey.
Pilgrims – even the most wealthy – always walked the last few miles as a mark of respect...
But this man was openly riding...?
The words of the prophet drifted into the mind:
“Behold, your king comes to you, humble and riding on an ass”...
Could this possibly be the one?

This quiet figure on a beast of burden?
Was this the king of peace?

According to Mark telling us the story, Jesus knew that an animal would be ready for him to ride on.

“The Lord needs it” is reason enough to let him have it.

No argument. No questions. Nothing.

The fulfilment of the old promises is much more important to the narrator than the logical reasoning in the story itself!

A king had been expected – already long before!

“A king will come to you”... the message is for Jerusalem, the city. And the messengers who bring it are ordinary Galilean pilgrims.

Their shouts of praise, their “hosannas” and blessings make it obvious who they are expecting to come. Their actions and reactions, their cloaks on the road, their branches from the trees show who they see:

the gentle king who is so different from all other kings humankind had ever witnessed...

Was he the king of peace?

Certainly Jesus wanted to raise this question.

This was one of the rare moments when he went out of his quiet way to draw attention to himself.

Perhaps he wanted people to take special note of what he was going to say and do in Jerusalem? The city he rode into acclaimed as a king, and walked out of condemned as a criminal...

The king of the poor was not a clown who merely cheered up the crowd on a feast day.

The story of the cleansing of the temple that follows the entry into Jerusalem shows how seriously Jesus must be taken.

He cannot be ignored by the political and religious authorities!

He must be seen; and his power acknowledged.

And in the end this will cost him his life.

The gentle king on the donkey is not without determination and courage!

He has an important mission that forces the mighty in church and government to act.

The entry into Jerusalem is nothing less than a big political demonstration of an oppressed and suffering crowd that is longing for liberation and peace and a ruler to fulfil their needs.

But authorities in Jerusalem knew how to stop him... how to prevent him from changing the world... how to silence him for... well, we all know: not for long!

The drama that had begun on the banks of the Jordan when Jesus had himself baptised by John is the story of a journey that seems to be ending at a cross in Jerusalem.

So was it all a waste of time?

Were all the hopes of Israel just wishful thinking?

Was Jesus' life wasted in a horrendous misconception?

Many might well have thought so.

But to those who knew him well, to those who knew him best, there were memories and impressions that cut deep into their minds... that helped them to see.

When they looked back over his life in the light of the resurrection, they could see not just the truth of his claim, but also the nature of his kingship.

They suddenly understood what kind of king he was... and how his power and authority were expressed.

When they realised that, they knew there could be no other way such a king could enter his city – except humbly on a donkey. And there could be no other throne from which to reign but a cross.

And when I look at this king, I remember and see the blind restored to sight and the lame healed.

From this king I hear words about loving God and loving my neighbour, about loving God and loving my enemy...

And with this king I see those words being put into practice.

Then and now people can sense a sovereign freedom about this man who owned almost nothing. A freedom never known by the wealthy and powerful.

I can see people changed, brought to new life, filled with dignity by this king who was ready to share to the utmost the life and death of his people...

Obviously the people who were threatened by such a king were the greedy... the abusers of power, the self-opinionated and the self-righteous.

From his side, Jesus did not want to threaten or destroy; he just offered a change... which they couldn't face.

Whereas for the simple folk, the people of the earth, as the Hebrew Bible calls them, there was an ultimate attraction about him. The children must have felt that very strongly..., those who had nothing to defend, no status, no rights, no privileges in Jewish society, no possessions to lose. They were ever so free to see Jesus as he was.

“Unless you become as children you cannot enter the kingdom”, he once said... the kingdom of the most unusual king humankind has ever experienced.

Christ the king...

kingship for the powerless... for those with no authority...

Many people today feel powerless, with no authority, in the grip of powers beyond our control, having no say.

We may feel attacked by prejudice and ignorance, but the king of the demonstration at Jerusalem offers us an authority open to all; an authority more deeply rooted and infinitely longer-lasting than the authority of any earthly power.

The authority of Christ

is the authority of love and faith, of goodness and integrity.

And it is an authority that no one can ever take away.

Not just the old Israel but also our world today, our country, our city needs people with such authority!
And I believe we can all have it.
We have already got it – if we only care and dare to show it.

It is of course not popular to sit on a donkey, to possess nothing, to fail in the eyes of the world and to end at a cross...
and all the shouting of the crowds in favour of Jesus has long ago died away...
But Jesus remained.
He remains ever since.
Simply.
Gently.
Kingly.

He is totally woven into the fabric of human history, forever present in the world.
Again and again he calls us to follow him, follow his way, enter our city...
And whenever we feel helpless and hopeless...
whenever we feel useless and powerless,
we might remember this day and this king.
We might remember the cloaks on the ground
and the palm branches waved with joy and hope
for a new kingdom to come.
Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
as you rode into Jerusalem,
crowds of people rejoiced and praised,
then turned away and abandoned you.
We pray that we may remain with you,
confessing your name
even in those places where you are scorned.
Amen.