

The comfort of companions

One thing is for sure, and that is that there was nothing spontaneous and unplanned about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. No, there was nothing spur-of-the-moment about it, in fact it was probably the most choreographed incident in the whole of Jesus' ministry. Indeed that's why the description of it is so strangely weighted. The whole incident takes eleven verses to narrate, and of those 11 verses fully six of them are all about preparing for the procession by procuring the colt on which Jesus was to ride. The actual procession only takes three verses. Jesus has clearly set it all up very carefully indeed – the colt in the village which he has presumably identified and selected, and then the two disciples who are detailed to get it with a message for anyone who asks what they are doing. Could there even be some pre-arranged signal involved here: someone will say to you, "why are you doing this?" and your answer will be 'The Lord has need of it and will bring it back here immediately' – nudge, nudge, wink, wink. And there's the reference to the fact that the man will be carrying a water jar – again, is this a coded sign, like a spy wearing a red carnation in their lapel? Clearly Jesus has carefully planned this entry into the capital city, worked out the details and left nothing to chance. So why?

Well, what we have to understand here is that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is best understood as an invasion of an enemy stronghold. This is Jesus' assault by him and his army against the powerbase of his enemy, Jerusalem, and especially the temple. And of course it is the most unlikely and unusual invasion. After all, he rides not on a warhorse but on a colt. And who is his army? Well, his army is the band of pilgrims who have come down from Galilee with him and who strew their coats on the road and wave their leafy branches. Note, in Mark at least, that the people in this procession who cheer Jesus are not the people of Jerusalem – they are the foe. Those who cheer him and shout, 'Hosanna!' are people who have accompanied Jesus down from Galilee and who have good reason to acclaim him as Messiah. They are people who have heard Jesus teach and recognised his authority. These are people who have been healed by his touch, who have seen his divine authority in action. This is his rag-tag army who now march to Jerusalem to liberate it with the good news that God's Kingdom is coming!

And note too that in Mark this procession takes place outside Jerusalem, before they actually reach it, as they march down from the Mount of Olives from where it was believed that the Messiah would come. This procession with the branches and the cloaks takes place on the road to Jerusalem – indeed it seems that Jesus enters the city alone. After describing the procession verse 11 says, ‘Then he entered Jerusalem’- not ‘they’ but ‘he entered’. And what is interesting too is that while in other gospels Jesus then proceeds to the temple to cleanse it and to throw out the money changers and overturn their tables Jesus doesn’t do that here in Mark. Here he goes to the temple and we’re told that ‘he looked around at everything’ and then went back to Bethany with the twelve disciples. In other words here he is reconnoitring, surveying the scene of the battle that he will fight the next day in the temple, planning his moves, his strategy, his tactics.

So let’s recap. What we have here is Jesus’ non-violent invasion of Jerusalem and the temple with his army of kingdom troops. And it is all carefully planned and staged. And what I want us to notice especially in all this is Jesus’ need for the support and strength of those around him. He cannot do this alone. He needs that little rag-tag army. That’s why he so carefully stages this procession with the cheers and the branches – he needs the support of his army, he needs their acclaim, their reinforcement. That’s what this Palm Sunday procession is all about – it’s Jesus grouping with his troops, affirming solidarity together prior to the invasion, drawing strength for what lies ahead. It’s a boost to his morale. Indeed that is why he retires to Bethany for the night. We know that Bethany was the home of Jesus’ close friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus and therefore he heads back out to Bethany with the twelve as this was a place where he could be amongst friends and with his beloved disciples. Jesus here is steeling himself for the events of the coming days, his assault on the temple and his invasion of Jerusalem, and as he faces all that what he needs above all is the strength and support of companions.

That is what makes it so poignant and sad that in the coming days Jesus will be progressively abandoned and isolated. As we enacted at the beginning of the service today, Jesus increasingly finds himself alone. Indeed that is what is so pitiful about the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus goes on the night of his arrest in order to wrestle with his destiny. Remember his plea to his little inner circle of closest disciples, Peter, James and John to watch with him. He craves their company in his hour of anguish. ‘Remain here and keep

awake' he pleads with them but three times he finds them asleep – and then they desert him and leave him alone. That is what is so heart-breaking about Peter's later three-fold denial of Jesus in the high-priest's courtyard. Peter followed Jesus thus far – but then abandoned him in his hour of need. The great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing from a prison cell where he had been incarcerated by the Nazis for his opposition to their regime, at a time when Christian civilisation was facing the prospect of annihilation, wrote a moving poem about Gethsemane in which he considers what it means to worship a vulnerable God, a God who in Christ renounces power and becomes powerless. The climax of the poem comes with the baffling yet profound line, 'Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.' Not what we would expect – God stands by us in our hour – that truth is explored earlier in the poem. But now Christians are called to stand by God, becoming God's companions in God's hour of need, (and we will sing a version of the hymn later in the service). And of course Mark goes on to present us with the agonising picture of Christ in the cross, utterly forsaken by God, crying out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And Christian theology has made much of Christ's abandonment by God, but that is only part of the sorrow of Calvary. Jesus is also abandoned and forsaken on a human level, left to face his final battle alone.

So we as Christians prize our solidarity with one another. We need one another. We followers of the Jesus of Palm Sunday and Holy Week are called to be God's assault force on the empire of the enemy. We are God's advance troops, invading the world's regime with our weapons of love and grace. We are God's expeditionary force, taking up arms of praise and worship and penetrating deep into enemy territory. But we are assailed on all sides, sometimes by doubts, sometimes by fear. How do we keep faith alive and keen in a militantly secular environment? Or how do we keep faith strong when, like Jesus, we feel that God is distant and silent and we feel forsaken? I was speaking to someone this week who said to me, 'I'm so afraid of death'. This is a believer. 'I believe in God and all that', she said, 'but I'm so afraid of death!' Where does she find solace? Where do we receive strength? Well, we receive it from one another. We find it in our worship. Like those rag-bag storm-troopers of the first Palm Sunday, we gather together in praise and worship in solidarity and we should leave this place heartened and encouraged for the struggle. And we find it in our pastoral care for one another. I've been so moved recently when one of our number has been in hospital and is now recuperating and a

whole support operation has been put into action with offers of meals and cleaning and childcare. This is the church in action!

Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving, and Christians stand by one another. We are God's gift to one another and so to the world. Praise the Lord. Hosanna and amen!

Lord Jesus Christ, who rode into Jerusalem
on the first Palm Sunday, ride we pray into the cities of our world and bring
your rule of peace and justice.

Lord Jesus, ride we pray into today's city of Jerusalem
in the aftermath of the recent elections there
and we pray that out of these elections will come brighter
prospects for peace and reconciliation
between Palestinian and Israeli, between Arab and Jew.

We pray for Benjamin Netanyahu as he forms his government
and show them, we pray, the things that work for peace.

And Lord Jesus Christ, who rode into Jerusalem,
ride into the towns and cities of Nigeria
as they conduct their elections.

We pray for a government of integrity,
And we pray for the struggle to rid the country of
Boko Haran with their violence.

And we pray for the safe return to their families of the
Over 200 schoolgirls kidnapped there.

O God, bring their release we pray.

And Lord Jesus Christ who rode into Jerusalem,
ride we pray into the homes of families of the loved ones
who perished in the plane crash in the Alps this week.

O God, as details of the cause of that crash emerge, we pray
for the bereaved that we would strengthen them in their anger
and devastation at what happened.

Lord Jesus Christ, who was acclaimed by your followers
and disciples as you approached Jerusalem,
bring your rule to your church and may your Kingdom
take shape within us.

Bless the witness of your church this coming week, Holy Week,
and especially the witness of this congregation here.

Be present by your Spirit in our extra services,
draw many here who rarely or never come,
and speak to them your liberating word of salvation.

And Lord Jesus Christ, in this family service,
bless we pray the children who are part of our church.
May they be nurtured and disciplined in the life of faith,
And bless we pray our crèche and Sunday school
and Junior Church leaders.

Equip them, we pray, with all the gifts they need and
inspire them in this ministry.

Here us we Lord Jesus Christ,

For we pray all these things in you name. Amen.