

*Faith's gestures*

It's not quite clear what exactly the point was of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we call the first Palm Sunday. Clearly it was carefully planned as Jesus sent disciples on ahead to procure a colt for him to ride on. Yet we must wonder what, if any, impact it made on the city. It seems from Mark's account that this procession was made up mainly of Jesus' followers who had accompanied him down from Galilee and the north, and it seems that most, if not all, of the procession took place on the road between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem and not in the city at all. It seems that it was only after this strange performance with the colt and the cloaks and the branches that Jesus entered the city. So it's not entirely clear exactly who witnessed it or what impact it made. And what I want to do this morning is to put this Palm Sunday procession in the context of other things that happened in the days that followed. I want us to notice that Holy Week contains a number of actions, performed either by Jesus or on Jesus which are highly visual and symbolic. You know the saying, 'actions speak louder than words' and during Holy Week we find several such actions: Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is one and we will look at two others.

I want to suggest that in these symbolic actions we are dealing with what might best be described as gestures, and a gesture is something that is usually regarded rather negatively. So we might say of an action that 'it was just a gesture' and we sometimes speak of 'an empty gesture.' But I want to retrieve the notion of gesture because I would suggest that gestures can have great power. A gesture might not change the world very much, yet it discloses a whole world of meaning – and let me explain by looking more closely at Jesus entry into Jerusalem: what world of meaning did it disclose?

Well, let's begin by noting what scholars tell us, which is that around the time Jesus did this it is highly likely that the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, would also have entered Jerusalem, only his entry would have been very different. His would have been full of pomp and ceremony, and it would have been a strongly military procession. This was Passover season, after all, a time when Jews recalled their liberation under

Moses from the foreign power of Egypt, and it was likely that if any plots against Roman rule were simmering this would have been the moment to act. So Pilate's procession is a warning – don't even think about it! - and there would have been much military hardware, swords and spears and warhorses to intimidate the population with Roman imperial power. So what does that tell us about Jesus' procession and its meaning? Well, Jesus' procession is the very opposite of all that. He rides on a colt, not a war horse. He has no weaponry. His followers have no uniforms or armour, just their cloaks that they spread before him. He comes not in the name of Rome but in the name of the Lord. In fact his procession is a parody of Pilate's and it's highly symbolic. It is freighted with meaning, portraying a world where God's rule comes not by force and violence but by humble submission to God's King. Jesus' little peasant procession is a gesture. It doesn't change the world, but it's power lies in the world it discloses, an alternative world to Pilate's.

Then, however, if we had read on, we would have come to another symbolic gesture. We are told that after a night at Bethany Jesus returns to Jerusalem and creates a furore in the temple. He overturns the tables of those who were changing people's money into the temple currency, and he drives out those who are selling doves for sacrifices and he clears the space. And of course this enrages the priests and the temple authorities, and we wonder what this was all about. What was Jesus doing? And the simple answer is that Jesus recognised that the temple had become a kind of an idol. It had become a nationalist symbol and a focus for all that was wrong with the Jewish religion of the day. And Jesus was calling Israel back to its true faith, and he recognised if the Jews rejected him they would end up on a path that would spell disaster – and inevitably, the destruction of the temple. And sure enough within about 30 years the Jews would revolt and the Romans would hit back hard and destroy both city and temple. And Jesus is acting that out. He is not starting an uprising – far from it. He is not trying to achieve some revolutionary goal. Not at all. Rather, he is prophesying in symbolic action what will befall the temple. His action here is once again a gesture that is loaded with meaning, full of warning: a call to repentance and to follow his way or suffer the consequences.

Then if we read on in the account of Holy Week we come to another gesture, another symbolic action which we read about in our second lesson. Jesus is in the nearby village of Bethany at the house of a leper – and that in itself speaks volumes of course: Jesus at table with a social outcast. And in comes this woman with a jar of expensive ointment which she breaks over Jesus, anointing his head. And some of those present are appalled. What a waste! Couldn't this ointment have been sold, the proceeds given to the poor? And maybe they have a point, and we might ask why the woman did this. What was she thinking? Well, I guess it was just a gesture of love. Something drew her to Jesus. Maybe she sensed what was about to happen to him. Maybe she longed to save him and she knew she couldn't. But as Jesus said of her, 'she did what she could.' Whatever meaning and significance this action had for the woman, however, Jesus gave it a deeper meaning. He saw it as an anointing of his body, a dignifying of his death by preparing it lovingly for burial. And I wonder if, as the ointment ran down his hair and his face, maybe Jesus thought of the last time he was anointed – at his baptism, when he was anointed by the Spirit of God and declared to be God's chosen and God's beloved. And if so then perhaps this action spoke not only of the woman's love but of God's love too. And perhaps that steeled and strengthened Jesus for the ordeal that lay ahead. I wonder how long the aroma from that ointment lingered. I wonder if as he hung on the cross, in the agony of God-forsakenness and in the mocking and the taunting and the hatred, maybe the perfume was still there, reminding Jesus in the midst of the horror that he was loved. This woman's action is only a gesture. It doesn't achieve much – indeed, yes, it's true, more could have been achieved if the ointment had been sold. And it doesn't save Jesus from the cross. It doesn't alter the course of events. And yet her simple act is pregnant with meaning. Through it a world is disclosed in which Jesus is loved despite all that will say otherwise.

So we have it: a procession into Jerusalem, a disruption of the temple, a flask of oil broken and poured. Here are actions of Holy Week that disclose a world of multi-layered meaning, distilling truth beyond words. And of course later, on Thursday evening, he will gather with his disciples in an upper room and there he will enact ancient gestures that had defined and shaped his people for centuries - as he took bread, and blessed

it, and broke it, and gave it. And in so doing he disclosed a world of memories, and conveyed the meaning of his death.

Why all this matters is that the church lives by such gestures: actions which do not necessarily make a big impact on the world but which convey God's Kingdom. Take this act of worship this morning. We gather here and we sing and we pray and we read and we speak and in so doing a world is disclosed, one which often contrasts with the world around in which our lives are set. Here in worship we enter a world where God is conveyed as real and living, however unreal and absent God may seem the rest of the time. And here Jesus is acknowledged as Lord no matter how many other lords may compete for our allegiance out there. And here in worship we listen for the Word of God, believing that God speaks to us, no matter how silent God may seem otherwise. And regularly God pledges his presence with us in those same gestures that Jesus performed in Holy Week: taking and blessing and breaking and sharing bread and wine. In all these ways an act of worship constitutes a world where life with the living God is imagined. It is only a gesture, but it discloses the world that we live by. And the same is true of the acts of compassion and of peace and justice that are part of our outreach as a church. This morning we appealed for volunteers for the Food Run, a ministry of this church that we are reviving, collecting perfectly edible food that would otherwise be thrown out and taking it to the needy. We know that in a world of appalling need and obscene waste we can't do much. We can't end waste and solve the problem of poverty. This is only a gesture. But what a world of meaning is disclosed: a world where there is enough for all, and where God wills life for all, and where precious resources are not thrown away and where money and economics do not rule everything! The church lives by such gestures.

One last point. These symbolic acts that we have considered outside and inside Jerusalem: they invite us to consider our own lives as gestures. My little fleeting life, a mere spark in the vast night of eternity, is just a gesture. It's a momentary reflex, a flicker in time. And the key question, surely, that hangs over my life and yours is not what our lives have achieved but what they have disclosed. What matters is not what impact we make on the world, but rather what our lives reveal. What do they

speak of? What story do they tell? What truth do they reveal about the world and about human life and about God?

A ragbag procession proclaiming Jesus, on a colt, as King; a scene of disruption in the temple and tables turned; a flask of ointment broken and poured by a woman who loved and did she what she could: just gestures, yes, but certainly not empty gestures. And our lives will be graced and fulfilled if they reflect something of the world disclosed by them, the world of God's Kingdom proclaimed on the first Palm Sunday. Amen.