

THE ROYAL VISIT

(Psalm 118.19-26 and Matthew 21.1-11)

Quite a long time ago, when what are now home groups were called cell groups, the leader of the one I was in asked each of us to tell the others something about ourselves that would surprise the rest. I found myself telling them about the time I took part in a ballet. The university drama society was putting on a very ambitious highfaluting musical play called *Hassan* which involved a ballet. For the girls in the ballet they persuaded a local ballet group to lend their talents. The men had only to hold them up as required. So there was I, a splendid figure in a tight-fitting top and red tights (I make a fine leg!) displaying my hitherto unknown gifts before the populace of Manchester.

Today's Gospel reading reminded me of another activity which I suspect few, if any, of you would expect me to have been involved in. I was once part of a protest march in London. It was in the early 1960s and it was protesting against the lack of jobs in the north east of England. There were people waving banners and shouting and chanting. As the march moved off and got going, it created a momentum of its own – an irresistible impulse.

I suspect that is what happened as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. There were thousands of people around, having come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They knew their scriptures – some very well. How, scattered throughout those scriptures were references to a king who would be sent from God. Specifically, they knew Zechariah's prophecy of the king who was to come riding on a donkey.

We can imagine those people spreading the word: *Hey, this is the man God promised, the one Zechariah told us about. Come on – grab hold of some palm branches like they did when Simon Maccabeus entered Jerusalem in triumph after he had beaten. Let's throw our cloaks in front of him like they did when Jehu was made king!* So the word spread among the crowd. The irresistible impulse took over.

Someone shouts *Hosanna* and it is taken up by the crowd. That means 'God save us'. For a few it might have just been an enthusiastic greeting. For most it was meant specifically and related to the hated Roman occupation. That's worth noting. It was not Jesus the spiritual saviour they were greeting but a saviour who would get rid of the Romans: and, a week later, how many of them would be shouting *Give us Barabbas!*

Then someone else starts to shout *Hosanna to the Son of David* – David who rode into Jerusalem as king– an event written on the heart of the Jews. Another voice comes in with *Hosanna in the highest heaven* – implying that the angels are shouting too.

Yet another takes up the traditional greeting to pilgrims at Passover – from psalm 118 – *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*.

Gradually all these become chants just like in the protest marches of our day; and the palm leaves are the placards of today. GIVE US JOBS: FIGHT RACISM: CUTS ARE CRIMINAL – you’ve seen them on the TV.

And in the middle of all this is Jesus – Jesus on the donkey – moving slowly towards Jerusalem and arrest, insults, torture, and death.

Jesus has this procession carefully planned. Jesus is the man with the plan! He has arranged for the owner of the animals to release them to someone who gives the password: *The Lord needs them*. He gives the people the opportunity to acknowledge him as king even if they are mistaken as to what sort of king he is. He knows what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Jesus is in charge.

Did you notice too, how the disciples carried out to the letter what Jesus asked of them. It’s in v.6: *The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them*. Jesus – the man of authority. We see it throughout the gospels. Jesus commanding the waves to be still. Jesus overcoming evil spirits. Jesus constantly confronting the religious leaders of the day and winning the argument. Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life.

Say to daughter Zion; see, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.

That’s the prophecy of Zechariah about 500 years before the first Palm Sunday. It’s worth looking at a bit more of the passage from Zechariah than just what is quoted in our reading. Listen to this from the Message Bible translation: *Shout and cheer, Daughter Zion! Raise the roof, Daughter Jerusalem! Your king is coming! A good king who make all things right, a humble king riding on a donkey, a mere colt of a donkey. I’ve had it with war – no more chariots in Ephraim, no more war horses in Jerusalem, no more swords and spears, bows and arrows. He will offer peace to the nations, a peaceful rule*

worldwide, from the four winds to the seven seas. Your king is coming! A good king who will make all things right!

I remember, from my history lessons, rulers called *benevolent monarchs* – absolute rulers who nonetheless had a concern for the quality of life of the people they ruled over. Is that a picture of the Jesus of Palm Sunday? The Jesus the crowd cheered because they thought he would free them from Roman domination?

Of course it isn't! Which monarch, however benevolent, would submit to betrayal, torture and death to save his people?

So how may we describe Jesus the king?

I categorised him earlier as a man with a plan.

And we saw he had authority – exercised not only on Palm Sunday but throughout his life on earth and even more so after his ascension.

We know what happened after that triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the palm branches, the thrown down cloaks, the hosanna shouts. We know about Good Friday. But we also know about Easter Sunday and Ascension Thursday.

So here we have a king who:

1. is supreme in authority,
2. requires our obedience to that authority,
3. has a plan for each one of us if we will but subscribe to it,
4. but who has suffered for us and suffers with us.

How can we adequately describe a king like that?

Surely the hymn-writer had it right. Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday is our King of Love as well as our shepherd. The question is: how do we respond to our King of Love?

Think back to those crowds. Think back to the Jewish religious leaders. Think back to Pontius Pilate.

They were looking for a lion. He came as a lamb, and they missed out on him.

They were looking for a warrior. He came as a peacemaker, and they missed out on him.

They were looking for a traditional king. He came as a servant, and they missed out on him.

They were looking for liberation from Rome. He submitted to the Roman judgement, and they missed out on him.

They were looking for a fit to their mould. He was the mould breaker, and they missed out on him.

Let's not miss out on our King of Love. Let's acknowledge his authority. Let's obey him and submit to his plan for us. Let's thank him for his sacrifice and turn to him in our times of need.

That way we won't miss out!