

Isaiah 50:4-9a**Mark 11:1-11****Introduction**

I still remember my journey up to Jerusalem from Jericho over twenty years ago now. Mile after uphill mile, it seems a long way even in a car. You wind up through the sandy hills from the plain, the lowest point on the face of the earth, through the Judean desert, climbing all the way. Half way up you reach sea level with still a fair sized mountain to climb.

This was the way the pilgrims came, with Jesus going on ahead. The sense of relief and excitement on reaching the top is intense. You have arrived – we are here in the city, and for Jesus he was about to enter Jerusalem to fulfil his destiny. For him it is a Royal occasion, carefully planned.

One of the reasons that we celebrate Palm Sunday is because it heralds the beginning of Holy Week when we remember the last week of Jesus' life and all that happened to him as he laid down his life for us. It is also a significant turning point in Jesus' ministry.

Our account today is from Mark which tells us of Jesus and his disciples on their journey from Galilee up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Mark says in his Gospel that "Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem". We get the picture of Jesus making a firm and deliberate choice as to what is going to happen next and almost literally girding his loins for the events to come

They finally reach Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover festival and this was the point of no return. Once Jesus entered Jerusalem the events he had foretold would take their course and he would suffer and die. This was a significant point in Jesus' ministry and the events are full of symbolism.

What I'd like to do is to look more closely at some of the happenings of that Palm Sunday morning and see what we can learn from them as we begin again to remember how Jesus suffered and died for us that first Holy Week.

The first and most significant thing is that Jesus planned his entry into Jerusalem and the way it would happen.

The story begins as Jesus and his entourage arrive at Bethphage, an eastern suburb of Jerusalem. Jesus directs two of his disciples to go ahead to the next village (perhaps Bethany) to find a donkey that can be used for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

He was travelling in company with many of his followers, but also with many other Jews who were coming up from their homes all over Israel to the city of Jerusalem for the festival. The journey up was a part of the ceremony and it was the usual practice to enter the city on foot. The pilgrims usually walked in together singing psalms called psalms of ascent, as they ascended the hill to the Holy city.

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Jesus however decided that he would depart from custom and he would ride into the city. He had arranged for a donkey to be available for him to use. Some people interpret Jesus' instructions to his disciples as showing some sort of supernatural knowledge but it is just as likely that there was some sort of prior arrangement for him to use a donkey. We know that Jesus had friends in Bethany, that's where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived and so it's not an unlikely assumption that Jesus had already put steps in place for his entrance to Jerusalem. It is even likely that the owner of the donkey was travelling in with Jesus and had made the arrangements for him so that the message "the master" (or owner) needs him would enable the servants to let the disciples to take the donkey.

It is clear from all four gospel accounts that it was Jesus who took the initiative in the matter of how he would enter the city. He made a deliberate choice to do something unusual – so it clearly had a special significance for him. So what was his intention?

It is the donkey that is the key to understanding Jesus' intention here

It seems clear he intended to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9

"Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion! Shout for joy you people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you! He comes triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey – on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

This is not a "triumphal entry" since there is no white horse, no trophies, no military language or imagery as would be usual in a triumphant entry. Rather, this is a "royal entry." "The heir of David who was to be anointed as king rode a donkey to his coronation." That was true of Solomon (1 Kings 1:32-40) who gained David's throne as well as others who sought it like Absalom (2 Samuel 18:9) and Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 19:27). With unmistakable symbolism, Jesus lays claim to being the authentic Son of David coming to Jerusalem to be anointed as the messianic king.

Jesus knew that the religious leaders were out to get him and yet instead of slinking into the city under the cover of darkness he rides triumphantly in a manner that is bound to reveal him as messiah. "Jesus entered Jerusalem in a way that deliberately set himself in the centre of the stage and deliberately riveted every eye upon himself. All through his last days there is in his every action a kind of magnificent and sublime defiance; and here he begins the last act with a flinging down of the gauntlet, a deliberate challenge to the authorities to do their worst."

Our passage doesn't tell us how the Jewish authorities reacted to Jesus' actions but it does tell us how the bystanders and fellow travellers reacted *"Many people spread their cloaks on the road,."* The bystanders recognise that Jesus' actions proclaimed him to be the promised Messiah and King.

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Spreading of garments in his path was a sign of homage to the King of Israel as we see when *Jehu's fellow officers spread their cloaks at the top of the steps for Jehu to stand on, blew trumpets, and shouted, 'Jehu is King!'*"

In the same way that we would expect to put down a red carpet for royalty (and these days' celebrities of every sort) the Jewish people would expect to put down their cloaks on the road for their king to tread over. By putting down their garments and the branches for him to ride over the bystanders were endorsing Jesus' symbolic actions. They were showing that they recognised the statement he was making and responded joyously by shouting and singing psalms that took up the theme.

The words they used come from psalm 118, which was read at the beginning of the service. It was one of the psalms seen as referring to the promised Messiah. *"May God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord! From the Temple of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God he has been good to us. With branches in your hands, start the festival and march round the altar."* It's possible that the use of the palm branches reminded someone in the crowd of the ceremony at the festival of Tabernacles when the people circled the temple waving palm and willow branches. The words of this psalm would have struck a chord yet the words add a special significance as they shout "Welcome to the one who comes in the name of the Lord and the words Hosanna echo the words of the psalm *"Save us, Lord save us! Give us success O Lord"*

So Jesus was proclaiming himself as the promised Messiah and King yet he was also making a statement about the nature of his kingship

Zechariah's prophecy spoke of a king who would "speak peace to the nations" not a conquering nationalist Messiah. He entered Jerusalem as a king but his majesty was hidden under an outward appearance that was far from kingly. He came on a borrowed, untrained foal, with no leather and gold saddle and bridle. His followers had to throw their robes over the donkey

for him and so he came with a kingly bearing and yet with meekness and lowliness.

So today, as we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on his way to die, as we collect or make our palms and sing hosanna again, what significance do Jesus' actions that first Palm Sunday hold for us.

First: they remind us that Jesus chose his destiny and more than that embraced it.

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I think sometimes we can see Jesus as having been rather carried along by events, the innocent victim that had to die to make amends for our sin and failure. But that is far from the case. Jesus, when he came to earth as a human being came with the intention of dying for us and his whole life on earth was moving towards the point when he would be seen to be the promised messiah by dying on a cross.

He made the choice to give himself for us and he embraced that choice, deliberately and whole heartedly. As we walk the path of his last days again this week let's remember that. Let's remind ourselves that Jesus chose to die for us and gave himself totally for our salvation.

Secondly they remind us that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that his coming and dying fulfilled all God's plans for his people.

The events of the last week of Jesus' life are filled with symbolism. All of Jesus' actions and words were carefully chosen and designed to show to his disciples and to us that he was indeed the promised saviour who would rescue God's people and restore them to friendship with him. As we walk the way of the cross this week let's look at his actions and think about his words and remind ourselves again who he is and what he has done for us.

Thirdly they remind us of the nature of Jesus Kingship

Jesus didn't come in might and power to overthrow the Roman empire. He didn't come in pomp saying to the people he lived amongst "Look I'm God I'm your maker bow down and worship me!" He came humbly and meekly, emptying himself of power, and dignity. He gave himself totally for us and gave away his rights in order to restore us to friendship with him. So

as we walk the way of the cross this week let's remind ourselves that this is the nature of the faith that he has called us to. It is one of submission and humble service. As he gave himself for us let us give ourselves to him.