

Entry into Jerusalem

Palm Sunday at St James – the power of symbol

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne 8am St James 2015

Keynote Bible Readings: Mark 11.1 – 11

Just along from where I live there's a field wherein a couple of donkeys graze. As I drive past my mind often goes to the Palm Sunday story. This is a reminder of the power of symbol as it is etched in my reflections on the life of Jesus and linking with his presence in the 'now'. It is this that prompts the theme of today's sermon message as we consider symbolism and our faith.

First then, let us consider the symbol *Jesus used to convey his kingship*. He was obviously aware of the prophecy of Zechariah: 'Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. This action of Jesus was clearly deliberate and pre-planned. He'd made arrangements at a village near Jerusalem and then instructed two disciples to go and get the donkey. So from there he would ride on the animal. There was further symbolism in the animal being young. This would represent to the Jews a recalling of sacrifices made in religious ceremony, of an animal or bird in healthy condition. Behind the choice of this one was an extension of the symbol representing the death Jesus would die, as a sacrifice. The message then of the choice and action of the donkey is of the nature of Jesus' ministry in obedience to the Father, of peace, and with a sense of foreboding. Into this there links the response of the people – disciples and possibly pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to acclaim Jesus as a king. Furthermore in fulfilment of another prophecy of Zechariah that this king would 'stand on the Mount of Olives.' (14.4). So then the Jews could hardly miss the symbolism of the action Jesus was thereby conveying. The spreading of leafy branches and cloaks on the road is further acclamation of Jesus kingship.

What does this represent for us? In the past kingship had to do with a ruler of a nation exercising power over the people, often engaged in fighting wars for territory. A recent TV programme on the History Channel traced the transition in England from this kind of rule to parliament – rule by the people, in England round the 13th century. Thus the notion of kingship there eventually evolved to a symbolic nature, indeed more like the nature of kingship as represented by Jesus. For me, at a time when some seek to achieve their ambitions by violence, there is indeed a very real alternative, and this we seek to live by, a kingdom or the rule of peace.

Second, 'the One that comes. A brief comment on the words we are told were exclaimed as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. These we acclaim Sunday by Sunday in our liturgy: '*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!*' The fact of these coming from a Psalm has prompted the reading of a portion of Psalm 118. This would have been well-known by Jews as it is read at the Feasts of Tabernacles and the Passover. It is a part of the praise of God for

delivering them from slavery in Egypt. Yet it also had a more sinister notion. It was also a cry, an entreaty to be free from slavery. Paraphrased it would be likely to have meant: 'Hosanna – victory – Here comes the One who will lead rebellion against the Romans. The kingdom of our ancestor David is going to be restored. ' But that was not in Jesus' mind – his purpose was to set humanity free from the power of sin, not from the power of the Romans. There is a symbolism here that we can note for our faith. This is in the words; *'The One that comes....'* Jesus is 'the one who comes' as he came as a baby, as he came to enter Jerusalem in peace, as the one who appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other disciples to signify his triumph over death, and the one who came as Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This one, this Jesus also comes to his people in these days, as Comforter, as bringer of consolation, as challenger, as guide, indeed in so many and varied ways.

Thirdly, having a *focus on symbol*. We know what is meant when this is mentioned. But we might be hard-pressed to actually define it. The dictionary definition is that symbol 'represents or stands for something else, usually by convention or association'. Thus by convention it would account for the earlier mentioned aspects of the Palm Sunday event. And also a sense of association in specific aspects. The word derives from the Greek meaning *sign*. I'm mindful in this of the number of 'signs' Jesus gave for the disciples to recognise his risen nature. To Mary Magdalene in the garden when she recognised his voice, 'Mary'. Doubtless Jesus had called her in the words she would recognise in his earthly ministry. Then to the disciples out fishing early in the morning, the invitation to cast the net on the other side of the boat, and the catch of fish. To Peter there was Jesus' question three times 'do you love me?' this would have left Peter in no doubt about his having denied three times knowing Jesus.

To the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and at the meal Jesus who broke the bread, 'And their eyes were opened.' That's the link for us in the meaning of symbol for our faith. It is as the hymn notes: 'God is here, as we God's people meet to offer praise and prayer.....Here are symbols to remind us of our lifelong need of grace; here are table, font and pulpit, here the cross has central place'.

For me, words are inadequate to describe the significance of symbolism, of Jesus' presence in the holy communion of the sharing of bread and wine. 'Take and eat, do this in memory of me.' Receiving the bread and the cup are very special moments in worship. In sharing this, it is as my eyes are opened.;' to who Jesus is, and what he did for me, and indeed all of us. Actually it is the power of the symbolism which brings to mind that Last Supper of Jesus. It is symbol which links the past with the present in an 'eternal now.'

In conclusion then it was a donkey, a humble animal, and the one who comes, riding expressing humility and foreshadowing the significance of peacefulness. We can acclaim him also in our praise and prayer. Consider then today, what these symbols mean for you, and how they contribute to and deepen faith.