

The lectionary reading for this Palm Sunday is Matthew 21; 1-11

Jesus comes to Jerusalem as king



Donkeys have played a significant part in my life!

I was born and brought up in Rotherham. When my sister and I were children, our house backed on to a Council depot. And in the depot were donkeys! Rotherham Council had developed a 'holidays at home' scheme in Clifton Park. After the war, many families could not afford to go away to the seaside on holiday, so the Council provided holidays at home. There were slides, roundabouts, a sand pit, a paddling pool- and donkey rides. And when not giving rides in the park, the donkeys were kept at the bottom of our garden. On more than one occasion, the council workers would call over the wall to my sister and I to come quickly, and the first births I ever saw were donkeys. When working in the park all the donkeys had a name on their nose bands, and one of the donkeys was called 'David' because I was there when he was born.

I don't want to get carried away with sentimentality about my donkey namesake. Donkeys can be smelly, stubborn and loud- particularly first thing in the morning when you are trying to sleep!

And yet- Jesus chose a donkey to enter Jerusalem for the last time. Well, actually, in Matthew's version, he chose 2 donkeys- an adult and a colt. Other gospel writers refer to one donkey. Matthew seems keen to make the link to Old Testament prophecies that the anticipated king would come *'lowly and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'* (Zechariah Chapter 9; verse9).

But, why a donkey?

1. A donkey not a chariot



By choosing a donkey to enter Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus contrasts himself with the kings and generals of the occupying Roman Empire, who preferred horses and chariots.

And the people responded to Jesus' more lowly entrance.

- They spread their cloaks on the road
- They cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road
- And they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven"

Roman leaders entering Jerusalem would have entered with great fuss. Their chariots would be a much safer mode of transport- literally keeping them above the people, with the prospect of a speedy get away if things looked as if they were going to turn nasty.

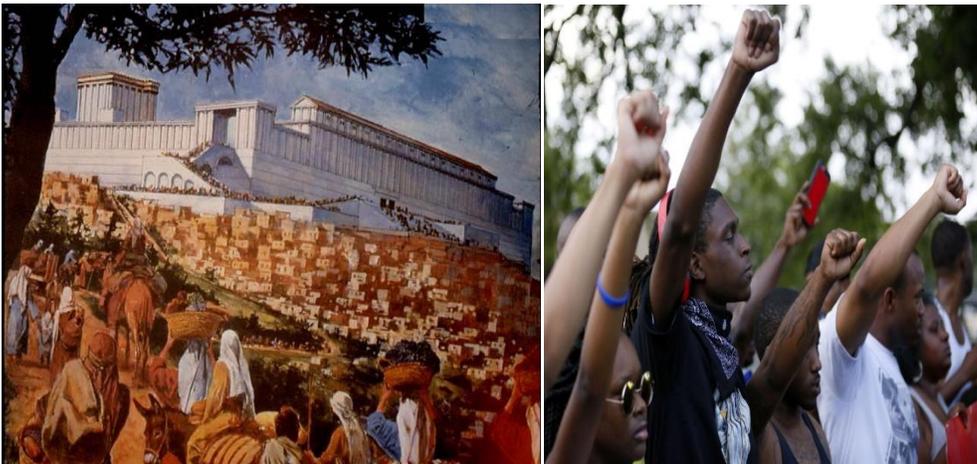
Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem, on a donkey, was not an accident, or something that just happened on a whim. It was a carefully planned way of highlighting the difference between the more usual militaristic approach to these things, and the way that a different kind of leader would come before the people. The planning had involved arrangements in advance. "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with a colt." This was not some random village, with a random donkey. This had been planned in advance. Arrangements had already been made with the owner of the donkey- "If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

The planning that went into this entrance to Jerusalem was probably just as thorough as the planning that went into a Roman leader entering on a chariot with horses and armed soldiers. It was important, and it required good strategic foresight to make sure it went as planned.

Yes, in part it was to fulfil Old Testament prophecies which would have resonated with the Jewish community in that occupied territory. But it was so much more than that. When your King comes; the Jewish King; your promised King- it will not be in the way you might have expected. A king without massive security; a King who was 'lowly'- at the same level as the people; a King who was accessible; and, can you believe it- a King on a donkey?

Graham Kendrick's popular song, 'Meekness and Majesty,' captures this paradox well. Jesus came as a King, but not as you might know it. His majesty is mixed with his meekness, "Love indestructible in frailty appears."

2. The pilgrimage that turned into a demo



Jerusalem that day would have been filled with pilgrims. The Jews were getting ready for their Passover celebrations, and they came to Jerusalem in great numbers. I guess if it were today, an event with those kinds of crowds in a confined space would have to be cancelled because of the Coronavirus risk. It would have been a public order nightmare for the Romans who were trying to keep the Jewish pilgrims moving along and not getting out of control.

The carnival atmosphere would not just be shared by the visitors; the locals would also be a part of it all. For some, it was a boom time for the local economy- shopkeepers, hoteliers and inn keepers all welcomed the Passover season. The local townsfolk looked forward to the influx of pilgrims, but would also have been inconvenienced by them. Routes that were usually easy to navigate- suddenly were much more difficult to get around because of the crowds, and prices in the markets would be much higher than usual.

Jesus and disciples entered Jerusalem for the last time, joining with crowds of Passover pilgrims from all over the world. And this all took place against the backdrop of increasingly tense relations between Jesus and the authorities- both Roman and Jewish. Extra soldiers would have been drafted in to keep the fragile peace. The Romans knew that it would be politically difficult to stop the Passover celebrations, but they saw the potential for things getting out of hand, if the pilgrims became too excited. They hadn't reckoned on a Jewish prophet from a small town called Nazareth riding into the city- on a donkey- and causing so much fuss.

To add to the sense of unease felt by the Roman soldiers, the locals and visitors were treating this prophet as if he were a king. This would not play well if it got back to Caesar. The locals were spreading their garments on the floor for the man on the donkeys to walk over, and cutting branches off the trees- surely that would count as a criminal damage, or at least a public order offence. And the pilgrims were shouting out that this was the 'Son of David, coming in the name of the Lord'. The Romans may not all have been schooled in the Jewish scriptures, but they knew that this sounded like trouble. This pilgrimage was in danger of turning into a political and religious demonstration.

I don't know if you've ever taken part in a 'demo.' They can be uplifting, but also they can turn nasty very quickly.

As a young man living in London, I had heard that there was going to be a 'demo,' and it was on my day off! The demo took place around the American embassy in Grosvenor Square, and was in opposition to the Vietnam War. From what I had heard and read, I was opposed to what the Americans were doing in Vietnam, although if I am honest, there was an element of going along to see what was happening. There were thousands of people there, and I was nowhere near the front where famous speakers were making passionate calls for the withdrawal of troops.

After half an hour or so, I realised I would not be able to see or hear what was happening, so I decided to make my way home. Suddenly, a large group of young men came running down the road, scattering the rest of us aside. They were shouting, "The police are on the bridge. We can force them back if we all act together." I didn't follow the crowd, but many did. When they had all gone, I made my way shakily to the nearest underground station. The following day, the press were full of stories about the 'riots' against the police, where many people had been injured. What started out as a passionate call for peace, quickly turned into something much more sinister and difficult for the authorities to handle.

The Roman soldiers must have realised the potential for things to turn nasty when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. On one level it seemed peaceful enough- a lot of excitement and shouting; some damage to a few trees- but, it needed careful watching. The Jewish people were claiming this man on a donkey was a new leader, and was the Son of David, coming in the name of their Lord. Yet, even within the Jewish community there were divisions. Some of their own leaders were beginning to suggest he was dangerous. This pilgrimage really was in danger of turning into a 'demo.'

3. So, what kind of leader?



At this difficult time in our national and international life, we are looking carefully at our leaders.

- We don't necessarily want someone who has all the answers- we know that no one person has **all** the answers to the Coronavirus crisis.
- We don't want someone who keeps well away from the rest of us, and just shouts instructions from afar.
- We don't want someone who talks down to us and treats us like children.
- We don't want someone who tries to hide the truth from us. We want someone who is straight with us.

In looking at the account of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem for the last time, we join with the people, the soldiers and the religious leaders in asking, 'so, what kind of leader is this?'

Jesus could have played it differently. He might have been tempted at that moment to do what was expected in the hope of pleasing more people. He could have acted the part of being the kind of king that many were expecting and hoping for- a great warrior who would deliver the Jewish people from their oppressors; a political leader who could gain influence in the Roman establishment, and also within the religious hierarchy; a great orator who could speak to large groups of people, similar to those I saw in Grosvenor Square, and inspire them to rise up to seek justice and take on the powers that be.

Instead Jesus acted out his vision of true leadership

- entering the city as a **humble peacemaker**,
- hungry only for **righteousness and mercy**,
- being **amongst** the people, not above them,
- being prepared to **lay down his life** for them.

For a moment, just imagine that we are about to choose a new leader for our community or church. (If you are a church leader or minister, please don't take this personally!).

- What would she or he look like?
- What personal qualities would we want them to have?
- What kind of person would be a total nightmare?
- What things would we want our new leader to change or challenge?
- What would we want she or he to retain at all costs?

- Would Jesus be our ideal candidate, or would we look for someone less challenging and confrontational?

The account of Jesus entering Jerusalem invites us to think about the kind of leadership he brought and displayed to the people. It also challenges us to think what kind of leadership we are drawn towards

- In our communities
- In our churches
- And, particularly at this time- in our nation and in our world.

And finally.....

I started with a story about donkeys, so I will end with one!



When my sister and I were young, and very familiar with our near neighbours- the donkeys- my Grandma pointed out how many of them had a cross on their back. Very authoritatively, Grandma told us that this was because a donkey was used to carry Jesus into Jerusalem. At the time, I accepted that explanation without question; after all, if Grandma said it, it must be true! I now suspect there may not be much evidence to back up Grandma's claim; it is quite possible that there were donkeys around at the time of Jesus, and before, with similar markings on their back.

Sydney Carter's song, 'Lord of the dance' has the following lines;

***'I danced on a Friday
when the sky turned black;
It's hard to dance
with the devil on your back.'***

At this time, as we see the number of deaths to Coronavirus soar day after day, it really does feel as if we have a heavy weight on our backs. Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing what lay ahead. Like the donkey he sat on, he carried the mark of the cross on his back.

There is nothing I can write today, that can take the weight of that fear and concern from our backs.

Jesus shares in our pain and anxiety. He deliberately came amongst us- vulnerable, lowly and unprotected. He could have turned and gone the other way. He chose, and he chooses, to walk with us in our dark times; our pain; and our grieving.

'When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" (Matthew Chapter 21 verse 10)

For us, today, we share their answer, 'This is Jesus' (v 11)- the one who walks with us even when, or especially when, the way ahead seems dark and uncharted.