

Head and Heart

24th March 2024 The Sixth Sunday in Lent, Palm Sunday

Readings

Zechariah 9: 8b - 10

Mark 11: 1 - 11

John 12: 12 - 16

Psalm 118: 1 - 2, 19 - 29



Main Attraction

I sometimes think that on Psalm Sunday the principal character may be a donkey rather than Jesus. Of course, the donkey is integral to the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy about the coming of the Messiah – the restorer of God's people. I can recall some occasions when the donkey has been the centre of our thinking – even a challenge to our faith! I have witnessed Palm Sunday processions to church which meant walking beside a well-dressed animal surrounded by a congregation waving all available branches and flags. Only once, though, when the donkey attended the service itself, much to the consternation of that week's cleaning team, one of whom had a bucket and scoop concealed under his pew!

Making the donkey the main attraction is akin to meeting King Charles and only being enthralled by his Bentley. Donkeys have made news headlines recently, not for their place in the Palm Sunday story but because it is feared these stubbornly intelligent, long-suffering, sentient friends are in danger of possible extinction. Their milk attracts an important market but it's the global trade in donkey skins which is putting them at peril. Of course, Jesus is the main attraction on Palm Sunday. He fulfils this amazing far-sighted prophecy of Zechariah. The prophet pictures a day, which we may speak of now as when the future of humankind is not determined by nuclear 'war chariots', massed cavalry, or snipers on city walls, but by stubborn gentleness, by bearing each other's burdens, looking out for devastated people locally and in nations world-wide.

Jesus' disciples were still learning from him and his sometimes-novel thoughts and ways. I wondered what they really thought about the procession into Jerusalem city. There was so much that they, like us, needed time and experience to help them understand. The gift of his Holy Spirit would change all that. All twelve disciples shared in the parade to the city. Some excited, some hopeful and fearing. One was disappointed and disillusioned. Poor Judas Iscariot.

John's account gives us more helpful details. He says the procession took place six days before the Passover. Pilgrims were gathered from anywhere in the world which was not more than two days journey away. They camped out everywhere in the city and the surrounding villages and fields. They were ready to enter the sacred moments of remembrance and the fun, feasting and family reunions of the festival. Like visitors and tourists everywhere, they were alert to gather for any unusual happening.

The resurrection of Lazarus from Bethany was one such event – a real firsthand miracle and maybe they would meet the miracles worker himself. Now John tells us the procession was the day following a special supper at Lazarus' house when Mary had anointed Jesus' feet with very expensive perfume and even more precious tears. The disciples were present, with such mixed emotions, realising, while not wanting to know for sure, these could be the last days with the Master. Perhaps Iscariot was expecting something different. Larger crowds coming to see the miracle place and the miracle worker strengthened the numbers processing into the city with Jesus. Surely this was the opportunity to declare himself the fulfilment of prophecy – the Messiah! Even higher hopes when, leaving the donkey, they went into the Temple Courts. Would Jesus turn things up-side-down again and claim his right to be God's chosen priest and king?

Then, John also tells how, at that previous evening's supper, Judas has objected to Mary's wasteful use of the perfume. *It could have been sold to raise funds for feeding the poor* he complained. Judas did not realise it but he was being caught up in those same temptations Jesus had fought when preparing for ministry, out in the Judaeen desert. Temptations to win the right to Messiahship by being a miracle worker – feeding the hungry - becoming a great potentate, the object of universal adoration and control. If only Judas could have understood and had time – lots of it – to learn how his ill response of betrayal was incorporated into the story of the Cross. If only we could see his ways in our present world issues. I can hear Jesus' critics – even among his followers today, saying with Judas. 'Let's have sensational demonstrations of, with and for God! Let's have bigger gatherings, popular choirs, powerful preachers, telling drama, youthful excitement while the Lord says again, *Not this way! But the way of a cross and a self-sacrifice, bringing transformed lives – new life in the Father – creating a Kingdom of God's people-lovers.*

The donkey was taken home. The Christ continued his journey – the Cross – Resurrection – Ascension – the Holy Spirit – a new world of new people – all through the humble, generous, saving love of the Father. I want Jesus as the main attraction and I'm happy to be his donkey if that speaks of him, his nature, his kingdom, and his glory. You too?



A Prayer based on Psalm 119: 1 – 2, 19 - 29

Lord, I want to really thank you!
Not just because you answer my prayers as I wish;
Not because you have helped me through the difficult, times of my life.
Not just because I love the celebratory worship
and refreshing fellowship among your people
I want to thank you because you are my main attraction,
You are good, your love is eternal.
Your sometimes 'round-about' or 'up-side-down' ways
And your altered life timetables prove the best.
You love never fails. Thank You.