

**Palm Sunday**  
**13/4/2014**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Zechariah 9:9-12**

**Psalm 118**

**Philippians 2:1-11**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

### **Coming into focus**

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With the rest of the events of Holy Week, the story of Palm Sunday is very familiar to those who've experienced a few Easters. We know the story of the collection of the donkey, the throwing down of the cloaks on the road and the waving of branches. We know of the hosannas, and the invocation of the kingdom of David. We know the traditional interpretations which contrast the militarist king on the mighty steed with the servant "king" Jesus on the humble donkey. And we know the irony of the change of public heart which apparently takes place over the days which follow, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus.

This familiarity indicates how effective at least *some* aspects of our Christian education has been, but also risks becoming cause for us missing the point. This a risk which can extend from Palm Sunday right through the Easter season to Pentecost, all of which, of course, is again very familiar to most of us.

Days like today, which mark particular historic events, can easily become mere commemorations or memorials. There's nothing wrong with remembering, but telling the Christian story is not simply about marking the past. It is also – in fact rather more so – about understanding the present.

In the first place we understand the present as something which *arises* from the past (which should be obvious enough!). But we also understand the present as something which we believe can, in a way, *become* like that past again, so that we are able to experience – *for* our time and situation – what was experienced in that time and place.

To be more precise, we look to see Jesus presented – literally *present*-ed, made present – to us again *as the Christ*. We tell the story because the story is about a life-giving, hope-creating contradiction: the bringing together of a peasant teacher and the messiah-ship or kingship of Israel. It is when we catch a glimpse of the fact that this Jesus, who is kind of like most of us, is at the same time quite like none of us, that we move past merely a remembering to a re-*presenting* of Jesus as the Christ. What we remember today tells us of a God who sees differently from how we see, such that a plain fellow on a donkey might, however fleetingly, be seen as king and the hope of the people, the very presence of God.

For those who were there on the day of this approach to Jerusalem perhaps nothing was really seen at all. Jesus had certainly established a name for himself, but there's no real reason to think that it was not almost an accident that he happened to be approaching as an enthusiastic crowd danced about. Whether by design or accident, Jesus appears in the guise of a king, only to pass back to the appearance of visiting pilgrim again by the end of the day (cf. v11). What we have here is, in effect, another "transfiguration" story, if a little less spectacular than the first (Mark 9.2-8), in which a glimpse of what makes Jesus Jesus flashed in front of his disciples.

But even as we remember the story in this way we have to be careful that we don't, again, just leave it all back there as if "once" Jesus the backwater boy appeared as more than everyone thought he was. Faith is not about believing that "once" something happened, not even the "big" somethings like the resurrection. If this were faith then it would have to do with invisible and absent things – things to which we implicitly have no access. This would not be faith so much as gullibility.

Faith is rather the belief that God can make of the world what he wants, because God is free to determine first himself and then the world. What we see is not evidence of the absence of God but clay in God's hands for whatever good thing he would make of it.

Jesus on the donkey is both exactly what he looks like, and not at all what he looks like, and both at the same time. He is, as he appears to be, a country chap – albeit a special one – riding a donkey into Jerusalem. At the same time, the riding of a donkey into Jerusalem was seen as a sign of the approach of Israel's king (cf. Zechariah 9.9).

It is not, then, the donkey which doesn't fit in the picture here, replacing a king's warhorse, but Jesus himself. The donkey is here a crown: the sign of the presence of something special, but there doesn't seem to be anything special about the one sitting on its back.

To believe in this God is to hold that both these things can be true at the same time: that ordinary every-day flesh can be the presence of the Word of God, God's Christ, God himself, the plain thing and the divine thing not so much occupying the same space as given each other definition. As God draws near the world becomes sharper, more clearly defined, and so more simply *world*. This God, when he draws near, *brings us into focus* like turning a ring on a camera lens. It becomes clearer where we begin and where we end.

As Jesus draws near to Jerusalem, and to Good Friday, *we* come into sharper focus, in our weakness indicated in what happens to him, but seen also in the extent of the love with which God reaches out to us in Jesus, proceeding as he does to death even on a cross. All of this is so that we might be seen, and see, more sharply, and be healed.

We hear the story of the palm procession today as a signal indicating what will be remembered in the week ahead. But let our remembering not be one which merely rehearses facts and accounts, a time of trying getting into our heads things which seem to be somewhere else and not of our time here and now.

Rather, let us seek that definition – that clarity of vision – which comes when God draws near, even in the very mundane things of the world, that the possibility of God meeting us in what seems to be nothing – even in what seems to be deathly – might remain alive, a hope which gives us life in the midst of the change and decay which threatens us from all around.

By the grace of God, may we too then find voice to sing hosannas as Jesus passes by us, living out our calling, that we might hear that call again and following in the faith that with this God, good can be made of all things – even us.

Amen.

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