

Palm Sunday
20/3/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 118
John 12:1-19

Getting the joke

I would venture a guess from the “maturity” (age!) of most who make up our congregation here that it’s not a great proportion of you who are fans of the TV program “The Simpsons”!

On one level it’s simply a cartoon show, in which the characters do the silly types of things done in cartoons. But on another level, its humour is often a very sophisticated interaction with other elements of our culture. What might look on the surface like a joke or a funny situation in its own right will often be a reference to some other movie or historical event which has captured our imagination over the last few decades.

So, for example, in one episode [there’s a scene](#) in which the brat-child Bart incurs his father Homer’s wrath, and a chase ensues. Homer is rather a “big-boned” fellow, and so as he chases Bart down the stairs he’s portrayed as a great rolling boulder threatening to crush the fleeing boy. The chase continues on the lower level of the house, as the boy darts into the garage. The garage door onto the street – and to freedom – is open, but Homer activates the automatic garage door closer. Bart just manages to slide under the door before it shuts, but loses his hat in the process. At the very last moment his hand appears again under the door to snatch the hat back, leaving his father locked in the garage, and Bart to put the hat back on his head and complete his escape.

It’s funny enough to watch as it is, but in fact it’s a rip-off from one of the best-known opening scenes of a movie in the last 40 years, in which the adventurer Indiana Jones does just the same thing, fleeing a rolling boulder in a cave after setting off an ancient booby trap – closing trap doors and lost hat and all!

Now, the point is simply this: in order to understand *fully* the joke in a scene like the one from “the Simpsons”, you have to have seen the movie *Raiders of the lost Ark*. You’ll get something from the show even if you haven’t, but you’ll miss the whole joke.

This transfer of meaning is the kind of thing which is happening when we come to a text like the one we’ve heard from John’s gospel this morning. While, on the surface it’s obvious what is happening, there are other things happening in the background which we don’t see because we’re not 1st century Jews. In a sense, we haven’t seen the other “movies” which the gospel writer refers to when he tells us these particular stories. And so, even if we feel drawn to the stories, we’re not going to get the full point even if we find the “surface” reading entertaining or instructive.

We see Mary anoint Jesus’ feet with perfume and wipe his feet off with her hair in a scene which is almost erotic. We hear the good economic sense of Judas about the “wastage” of the very expensive oil. We see Jesus on the donkey – perhaps interpreting that on the one hand as being a bit comic (as donkeys are!), perhaps interpreting it on the other hand in terms of peaceful intent (because it is not a war horse). We hear of the plot against Jesus, and perhaps interpret that in terms of political intrigue and jealousy. That is, we tend to impose on the story what we *think* it’s about, because it’s a story from a different place and time and we’ve only gotten half the joke.

So, for example, we will miss that in both the anointing of Jesus and the entry to Jerusalem on the donkey there is a claim being made that Jesus is the king of Israel. It's not said explicitly, but key words and images would have reminded the original participants of ideas surrounding Israel's kingship, just as Bart Simpson snatching his hat from under the closing garage door might remind us of Indiana Jones.

When a person was chosen as king in Israel, he was anointed with oil. And the word "anointed" in Hebrew and Greek is translated by the English words "Messiah" and "Christ". The story would suggest that Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the king. An ancient prophecy speaks of a coming king of Israel entering the city on a donkey (cf. Zechariah 9.9). Jesus on a donkey makes a reference back to that tradition. These stories are telling us much more about what Jesus said and did; they are also inviting us to see a particular *meaning* for the events. The Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is neither erotic nor a basis for debating the economics of poverty but a kind of coronation. Jesus on a donkey is neither comic nor merely humble but the crowned Jesus entering his capital, the donkey *being* his crown.

Now, perhaps this is all very "interesting", but *just that* brings us to one other problem in terms of our understanding what is happening in these events, and what difference they might make to us. It's usually the case that if someone has to explain a joke to you, it ceases to be funny. You might admit, "Oh, I get it! Yes, yes, very clever" – or something like that. But an *explained* joke won't really grip us. What makes Bart Simpson grabbing his hat really funny is that you've already enjoyed the Indiana Jones movies.

And this is the case also with readings like this mornings. I can *tell* you what it all means, what the references are – in a sense explain the joke – and your response will almost *have* to be – "Oh, OK. That 's interesting!" So for example, I can say to you that these readings are really about Jesus as king, as in fact is much of John's gospel

But for *us* today the purpose of kings and queens is to give the editors of woman's magazines plenty of faces to stick on the covers of their weekly editions. We might still be *fascinated* with the idea of royalty and the wealth and status which comes with it, but we scarcely imagine that we *need* kings or queens. Adding the title "king" to the name Jesus doesn't do anything for us, for we know of no real need for kings. For the Jews of Jesus' time the presence of a true king of Israel was tantamount to the very presence of God himself. But that makes no sense to us.

And this dynamic leads to a strange conclusion. To *feel* what the stories from our readings this morning might say to us today, we have to *forget* about anointings and donkeys and kings and ask: what would upset *us* in the same kind of way that Jesus upset those who plotted to destroy him?

If we understand him rightly, Jesus will bring this kind of challenge to us today. It won't be in terms of kingship, because kings don't mean anything much to us these days. Rather, Jesus will challenge us at the point where we think we are strongest, just as he challenged God's people then on the things they were most secure about. Jesus anointed at Bethany, Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, is Jesus presented to us as an invitation: whatever in your life stands in the place where a king might once have stood, let that thing be subject to a deep scrutiny.

It's impossible in the time we have to give a full account of precisely where that challenge might be, not least because it there is often something very personal about it. But it has communal dimensions as well, and we can make the point more concrete in relation to the meeting which is follow our service today, at which we'll discuss the question of our mission and building resources.

It is easy, and very tempting, to pluck imperatives from a text like the one today, in order to make arguments about how to vest the mission of the church. On the one hand, there is profligate Jesus, for whom expending a year's wages in a single act of devotion is justifiable. No few church spires have been justified on the basis of this text. On the other hand, there is humble Jesus who needs only a donkey to be seen to be king. Not a little righteousness has been claimed by those who have sought to live a "simple" Christianity.

But it is the *same* Jesus whose kingship is demonstrated in these two wildly different actions – the anointing and the donkey ride. This is to say, there is no help in these texts for our decision-making, if we are only reading into them a preference for the one over the other. If there is something here which will help us, it is deeper than the first things we see as we look to Jesus; there is another "joke" going on which is not the perfume or the donkey, not the buildings or the mission, but which can justify them both.

This deeper reality is given in the gospel itself, in the summation of the purpose of Jesus' ministry in his prayer for the community which is soon to be left "without" him (John 17). Jesus leaves the disciples not with the requirement to do as he has done, but to be as he has been: at one with each other, at one with God, neither of which is possible without the other.

The future of the church – our congregation, the Uniting Church, the church catholic – is in nothing external to the life of the church itself as the Body of Christ. To refer to the demands of worship on the one hand, or service on the other, *is* to externalise what really matters by playing them off against each other, by playing *ourselves* off against each other as we prefer the one or the other. Our concern is not the *sign* which is devotion, nor the sign which is humility and service, but the thing signified: the meeting of God and humanity in Jesus himself.

This is the meaning of our existence, the thing to which all that we do as church is to testify. To sing, "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" is not to prescribe *how* he comes, but only to rejoice that he does, bringing the meeting of God and humanity. It is this coming and gift, and nothing else, which makes us what we are created to be.

This does not tell us *what* to decide, only what the decision will point to: God's coming to us in Christ, that we might come to God. What we do must seek to be such a coming to God as we come to each other.

If we can do *this*, then whatever concrete form it takes will be worthy of a Hosanna, for – in that – God will have come to us.
