

Palm/Passion Sunday 2021

Mark 11:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9, Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 14:1-15:27

In years past, in rather Dickensian vein, I have often described today as the tale of two processions. The triumphant one – Jesus arriving in Jerusalem to cries of jubilation and the ignominious one - the procession to Calvary to cries of derision. But over time I have become increasingly uncomfortable with that separation. I think the Church was wise in bringing together these two great events of Palm and Passion because they are one; they are both paradoxically processions of triumph. Both demonstrate, and call out, a gross distortion of power and authority, secular and religious - the arrival of a king on a donkey and his subsequent enthronement on a cross are one great procession of protest.

So let's consider the Tale of two processions in different way, based on a speculation, but one that I rather think demonstrates the meaning behind the great events that we celebrating and commemorating. Some scholars believe that the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem to begin that fateful week was specially timed. Some speculate the procession of palms was timed to coincide with the arrival of Pontius Pilate from his quarters in Caesarea, coming in to Jerusalem to oversee good order during the Passover.

So while Jesus was arriving with his ragtag group of supporters on a borrowed colt, across town Pilate would have been arriving on his war horse with his cortege in a display of power and authority designed to intimidate and remind the populous of who exactly was in charge. Jesus' arrival was a parody of Pilate's.

Whilst there is no Biblical warrant for this theory or whether or not it is historically accurate matters little. What does matter is that in these two processions, in the coming together of Jesus and Pilate we experience the clash of authority which is made explicit in John's gospel but which lurks behind the Markan account that we heard this morning. 'Are you the King of the Jews?' says Pilate. Jesus' enigmatic 'You say so' challenges Pilate's understanding of kingship, power and authority.

One of the reasons that I have moved away from thinking about two processions - Palm and Passion is that the life of Jesus, particularly in Mark, is one procession. I was chatting with a Parishioner during the week who described reading Mark in one sitting as 'breathtaking.' Jesus is on the move. He is driven by his mission to reveal what it means to be called the Son of God. He does this in this procession, this life, a life which leads to the cross *the* demonstration of what it means to be the Son of God.

Paul tells us in that extraordinary hymn in Philippians that the path of Jesus is one of obedience. The authority of Jesus is to be found in his obedience. This is an uncomfortable idea, finding authority in obedience, it doesn't fit today, it probably never has, but I believe that we know it to be true. A former CO would always begin his orders with the word 'listen' and this is what we hear again today in Isaiah. The servant in Isaiah is only a teacher because first he is a listener he is obedient.

Yet Jesus' conformity, his obedience is not to a CO, it is not any earthly authority, least of all Pilate or the religious leaders, or to a hostile tyrant in the heavens, but to the root of his own life. He is himself the mind and heart of God; as he looks into the mystery of his own being in the Father, he acts out who and what he is - the embodiment of the Father's will for the healing of creation. This is our calling, to quote Rowan Williams: to imitate Christ in his submission is therefore not to do violence to your own proper reality, but to discover yourself as a created being - as a being whose life is grounded in the loving gift of God and nothing else.

When we grasp this truth we understand the clash of authority that is presented to us today. As so we conclude our Lenten journey a question confronts us, a question that has lurked behind our pilgrimage beginning with the wilderness, - to whom is our obedience due?

It is too easy to leave that question hanging, because it presents us with a series of other questions. Mark's entire gospel is a 'via crucis' a way of the cross. A way we are called upon to follow. As we approach the cross, and look back over the gospel of Mark we see that Jesus' expressed his authority simply by his obedience to and embodiment of God's will; fundamentally ensuring that everyone, ordinary people may be treasured and looked after, especially those on the margins.

Palm Sunday has become a day in which we are being asked to demonstrate the gap between the politics of our day and the will of God. In the light of the basic injunction of Christian faith to be attentive to the will of God, paying attention to the way in which a government pays attention becomes a proper expression of obedience. This is what brought Jesus into the clash between State and the Temple and the will of God that we celebrate today and during the week.

Our political system has been weakened in recent times, it continues to be weakened just this week. And yet it is system that we are called to be a part of, obedient to even. Yes, we should be properly and critically involved in our democracy but we do so by being attentive, obedient to God's will demonstrated on the cross and to put the fruits of our attention at the service of government in order to stir their attention. May we be prepared to do without counting the cost? Amen.