



AFC 301
Numbers 21.4-9
Mark 11.1-11
28th March 2021 Palm Sunday

The Triumph of Love

Introduction to the theme:

What sort of leader was Jesus?

Processions are a big part of Palm Sunday folk lore. In normal times some churches even have them outside, down the high street with a donkey leading the way. Here at AFC, we've occasionally had Junior Church process into, and then around the church, singing Make Way, Make Way on this, the first day of Holy Week.

The nature, and often the size of a procession, is dependant on who it is that is walking or driving down the street. And it's been the generally held view amongst Christians that Palm Sunday's procession was something of as Triumphal Entry, and I want to question that this morning later in the sermon.

An important issue for a day such as this is: What sort of leader was Jesus?

As I pondered this, I goggled the phrase *Leadership Styles* discovering the authoritative number was anything from 3 to 13. Some I recognised and could identify with, others came as new to me: Authoritative, Participative, Delegative, Laissez-Faire, coach style or transformational.

At college I never quite knew if our Pastoral Studies tutor was being serious or tongue in cheek when he described his style, whilst in local ministry, as a Benevolent Dictator.

Last week's Church Times had an interesting article entitled: *Can leadership be taught?* I was impressed by one response from the

principal of a theological college who said: *There are some who find it easy to gather others and who have the confidence to step out and inspire others to follow them. They could be tempted to think of themselves as a hero leader. We tend to discourage this as it encourages a culture of dependency. The Church needs loving, wise and humble leaders who depend on God...*

Well, one thing is certain we all have opinions about our leaders and whether they are doing a good job. I looked up the Prime Minister's historical opinion poll ratings and saw that over the last 18 months they have fluctuated greatly. At their lowest with a negative 27% net approval, probably because of the Christmas restrictions, and at their highest a positive 13% net approval, probably coinciding with the successful vaccination programme.

That voter approval rating volatility is expressed differently in the story of Holy Week. At its beginning, we often say, the crowd showed their approval by cheering Hosanna. By its end they screamed crucify.

Jesus used different terms for his own leadership style. He called himself a shepherd or a doorway. He seems to have willingly accepted and revelled, even, in the term rabbi, or teacher. By taking up a bowl and towel and washing his disciple's feet he unambiguously defines himself as a servant.

Yet time and time again others seem to want to make him into a king. And then, just as now, kingship meant many things depending both on the personality of the monarch and your place in society. It has always been an ambiguous identity and maybe we could argue it was never Jesus' preferred style anyway.

So, identity is a big issue that surrounds Palm Sunday. Actually, it's a big issue for any church today because the sort of God we believe in ultimately moulds us into the kind of Christians we are in the process of becoming.

So, we let the question linger: What sort of leader was Jesus?

The Triumph of Love

Anointing kings is an old tradition and in the British Coronation Service still considered to be the most sacred.

In the ancient times of the bible both kings and priests were anointed; a special moment of consecration that gave them, so it was believed, a certain God given authority.

The word Messiah means Anointed One and there was a deep longing in the days of Jesus for such a person to emerge and offer hope. Some even imagined a figure who could sit once more as king of the nation replacing the occupying power of Rome.

Those longings motivated many, perhaps for good reason. Longings bound up with issues of liberty and a return to indigenous national identity. And maybe, with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes clear how all of that fuelled the dream of the Zealots for a powerful political, even military Messiah. One who might enter Jerusalem on a white charger rather than sitting astride a donkey.

This city was a royal place; made so by the likes of David and Solomon, yet the only person who lived in the palace now was a puppet king, Herod, placed there by the governor.

So, on Palm Sunday a crowd gave its allegiance to a new king. As Jesus, something of a hidden Messiah enters this royal city he is not greeted in the traditional way as a pilgrim but as a sovereign. As the hymn puts it: *Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater son.* Or as Mark says: *Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David which is coming. Hosanna in the heavens.*

Waving palm branches and covering the ground with cloaks was the cultural norm at great moments of national pride. These were fever pitch occasions appropriate for a coronation procession or the arrival of a great general after a successful battle such as that of Simon Maccabeus.

However, and it's a big however, was this appropriate for Jesus, or might all this have given him Imposter Syndrome? And maybe the real question is who wanted a day such as this, Jesus or the crowd?

I'm not at all sure it's that different for many of us Christians today. We'd still love a procession for Jesus the King to come sweeping into town and powerfully put everything right; at least, our version of what is 'right'.

Yet we live in a world where our experience teaches us that God is much more likely to be there alongside us, giving us his support, love and compassion, in our Gethsemane moments rather than as a powerful king waving a wand making all our challenges go away.

Perhaps that's the subtle temptation of Palm Sunday, one that undercuts all that was learnt in the Wilderness Temptations, that it becomes a hollow Triumphal Entry when power tops love and popularity triumphs over integrity. We somehow constantly miss how Jesus plays it in that he wasn't riding a horse but came seated on a donkey. This was the anointed one arriving in peace, coming to us as one who serves, even willing to give up his life in the name of love.

It's thought there was another procession in town that day. Pilate enters the city from his seaside residence of Caesarea. He's come up to keep a watching eye over Passover. If Jesus comes from the east Pilate arrives from the west. His procession is the one full of symbols of power. Soldiers attend him, imperial banners are paraded before him for the governor is the representative of the world's ruler: Caesar.

Yet from the Mount of Olives there comes a man riding on a donkey and the only destination for this procession, it's ultimate one that Palm Sunday, was The Cross.

So, what started in a village close by the Mount of Olives ends at Golgotha on Mount Calvary.

Now, sometimes we view the cross as a defeat. We mourn, along with Judas, that the mission of Jesus ended this way.

Yet love was not snuffed out at the cross.

Perhaps what is more significant is to compare the love shown by Jesus that week alongside the silence often shown by his disciples, like Peter around that courtyard fire when he failed to speak up for his Lord.

The increasing isolation of Jesus as he is arrested and interrogated by Pilate and Herod, means that fewer and fewer utter a word on his behalf and become an advocate for him and his message.

It reminds me of that well known poem by the German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller:

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Last week 35 aid agencies, including Christian Aid, spoke up for the Syrian people on the tenth anniversary of the conflict. 6 million Syrians have fled the country and are now refugees elsewhere, whilst 6 million Syrians have become displaced within their own country. These aid agencies are calling on world powers to 'use all their influence' to stop the Syrian government turning on its own people.

Holy Week teaches us that Jesus refused to keep quiet in the face of injustice and chose instead to speak truth unto power even if he ended up paying the ultimate sacrifice for that.

One bible commentator I read the other day said of him these words that have stuck with me all week: *Jesus can only love at full speed.*

Isn't that a wonderful way of putting it. No compromise. No accommodation. This radical Jesus who spoke up for the poor and stood with the marginalised refused to be silenced by systems, both civil and religious, that ignored the cries of ordinary people. Jesus went to the cross and in doing so his actions speak as loudly as his words. He loved at *full speed*.

On our last visit to London before Lockdown we went on a guided tour of Westminster Abbey. There is, of course, so much inside the Abbey that is fascinating, yet I particularly admire what they have done just above the Great West Door in placing there ten statues of 20th century martyrs. One is the German Franciscan, Maximilian Kolbie who worked in Poland and lost his life at Auschwitz. A prisoner had escaped, and a cruel deterrent was enforced by the guards as they selected ten prisoners who would be starved to death. One of those selected cried out that he had a wife and child back home and at that moment Father Kolbie stepped forward and offered to take his place. For the next two weeks he was at the centre of that little group, praying with them as they grew weaker every day, till only he was left and eventually executed by lethal injection. Maximilian Kolby has a worthy place outside Westminster Abbey today, for he like his Lord, could only love at full speed.

Anthony Milner's hymn sums it up for me today as we enter this week called Holy. How does it go?

*Love is his word, love is his way,
feasting with us, fasting alone,
living and dying, rising again,
Love, only love, is his way.*

This is a procession to the cross, and if it is a Triumphal Entry, then it is the Triumph of Love.

May it be so, in the name of Jesus, whose love was not snuffed out at the cross, but is resurrected and blesses us every day of our lives. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 4th March 2021.