

Palm Sunday Perceptions

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Today is Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, where the word 'passion' refers to the sufferings of our Lord, especially at his crucifixion but also in the events of the week leading up to it. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. There are four aspects of this story which point to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem for the Passover festival being an historic moment.

1. The first is the enacted parable of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey.

Verse 30 has Jesus sending the disciples to get donkey for his transport, and one that had never been ridden. An unbroken/unused donkey or horse was like a 'virgin' animal that could be consecrated for a special or holy use (Deuteronomy 21 v 3 and Numbers 19 v 2). So it was appropriate for a King to use. (The OT mentions two sons of the King riding on donkeys - Solomon in 1st Kings ch1v33f and Absalom 2nd Samuel ch18v9.) We often forget that donkeys were viewed as noble animals in the East, rather than the ugly, dumb animals we westerners often view them as.

Of more significance is that entering Jerusalem on a donkey, would bring to mind for onlookers the prophecy from Zechariah 9 v9 which Matthew and John quote, about the coming Messiah. The throwing down of coats and branches in his path was also the way that kings and military victors had been welcome in the past as when King Jehu was proclaimed King in 2 Kings 9 verses 12 & 13.

We often forget what a brave and provocative action this was by Jesus. He knew that such an action would cause the authorities to want his head, yet he encourages the crowd to publicly celebrate his arrival. Previously Jesus had always played down and tried to elude the individuals and crowds who wanted to publicly promote his cause.

2. Another sign is the unusual way in which the donkey was obtained. Jesus predicts the donkey's presence at a certain place (and an unridden colt at that) as well as the questioning of his disciples by bystanders.

Scholars debate whether Jesus had prearranged the 'pick-up', and the phrase in verse 31 that 'the owner needs it', suggests that the donkey's owner was accompanying Jesus.

However, all this debate seems to miss the point that the gospel writer is making; that this incident also points to unusual events which suggest that Jesus was more than an ordinary person, if people can see it! Jesus' knowledge and power make things happen.

3. The third sign is in verse 37 when the crowds enthusiastically meet Jesus on the Mount of Olives and acknowledge Jesus on the donkey as King. They did this because:

i) Jesus was popular with the crowds through his healing of the sick/demon possessed, performing of miracles (feeding the 5000), teaching and defeating Jewish leaders in arguments. John's Gospel also tells us that on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life, and this made the crowds even more excited about him. (John ch 11 and 12v17)

ii) Patriotic fervour and anti Roman feeling was always strongest at the greatest of Jewish feasts, called the Passover. The Passover celebrated the Israelites' deliverance, their liberation, from the oppressive Pharaohs of Egypt - similar to situations throughout the world today when nationalist groups become wound up as they celebrate past victories: in Nth Ireland, Middle East, South African for blacks or Maori on Waitangi Day.

The Passover was also the occasion on which the Jews expected the Messiah to appear in Jerusalem. So there was a strong nationalist passion evident when Jesus arrived.

iii) The spirit of pilgrim enthusiasm and celebration was focussed on Jesus. They cried out "Hosanna", "Save us now" and they adapted the priestly blessing on pilgrims coming to Jerusalem saying, "Blessed is he who comes (the King who comes) in the name of the Lord" (verse 26). They also waved palm leaves which is not mentioned in this Gospel, but which was done to welcome a King or military leader. This was a coronation procession.

4) The Mount of Olives was to be the site of God's final judgement on the Day of the Lord (Zechariah 14 v 4). Josephus tells us that the Jews associated that day with the coming of God's Messiah. And so it was believed that those buried on the Mount of Olives would be the first to be raised to life. The western side of the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem has been a cemetery for 2400 years. This is still obvious today as the hillside is covered with wall to wall stone caskets in various states of decay, and is still in use today.

THESE FOUR CIRCUMSTANCES COMBINE TO MAKE THIS AN HISTORIC MOMENT.

The Pharisees react negatively to the crowd enthusiasm for their hero, as they feared for the future of Jerusalem and the nation, if the Romans got wind of a rebellion in the air. "Tell your disciples to be quiet", they command Jesus. But Jesus now welcomes being acknowledged as the Messiah, compared with earlier incidents in the Gospel story, called by scholars 'Mark's Messianic Secret'.

Jesus told the Pharisees that if the crowd did not cheer him, even the stones would cry out. After my discovery of just how stony Israel is, Jesus is indicating that the sound would be deafening! "Stones crying out", also indicates that Jesus' recognition as 'Messiah' is self-evident even to inanimate creation, implying that the Pharisees are rather dense not to recognise it and so slow to believe. Jesus is perhaps suggesting that a monumental national event is in progress, for which their whole history has waited, so that the stones would cry out in protest if Jesus did not receive his rightful welcome.

Then, as only Luke tells us, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. There is a memorial church on the Mount of Olives called 'Dominus Flevit', built in the shape of a teardrop in the 1950s, to honour this event.

In verse 41 Jesus said, "If you only knew today what was needed for peace. But now you cannot see it". He went on to say that Jerusalem would be destroyed because they "did not recognise the time when God came to save you."

This is the major point of Palm Sunday: The disciples, the crowds and the Pharisees (the Jewish Leaders) were all out of focus! They could not see in Jesus the arrival of their Messiah. They could not recognise the moment. They had wrong perceptions - a clash of perceptions with Jesus.

Jesus had showed no antagonism or militant tendencies against the Romans throughout his whole ministry. He chose to enter Jerusalem at Passover time from the Mount of Olives on a donkey, not a war-horse; enacting the prophecy of Zechariah.

If his observers recognised in Jesus' arrival the words of Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, then they would also have known verse 10, about the King establishing a reign of universal peace.

Yet the disciples and the crowd expected a military Messiah who would save them from Roman rule; overthrow the Romans, and set them free as a nation. They hoped for a military revolution.

Why did they miss the point of Jesus' mission so clearly? Why could they not connect the Messiah/Saviour with suffering, just as Peter could not at Caesarea Philippi, after declaring Jesus to be the Messiah under the inspiration of God's Spirit?

One commentator tells of an experiment in North America where volunteers wore stereo glasses (opticons) which allowed them to see two different pictures at the same time, one in each eye. In one eye was flashed a picture of a bullfighter and in the other eye a picture of a baseball player. The results were very clear. Those subjects from Mexico consistently saw only a bullfighter, but those from the USA consistently saw a baseball player!

And when the subjects were showed a playing card, a red six of spades, they reported physical discomfort when identifying it as, 'a six of spades' because they knew it was meant to a black card!

The experiment demonstrates that we tend to see what we are trained/conditioned to see, not what is really there. The disciples and the crowd suffered from this culturally conditioned blindness about what the Messiah should be, and could not see what Jesus wanted to be.

The same thing happened to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. When he saw the images of Christ/Messiah and Suffering /Death flash on his screen, Peter felt more than physical discomfort, he felt absolute revulsion. He said, "This must not be Lord! God forbid it! This must never happen to you." (Matt 16)

Preachers can also experience this at times. I heard of a preacher giving a sermon on the amazing, undeserved love and forgiveness of God, and then having someone commend him afterwards for being tough on sin!

But how do we project our own hopes and expectations onto Jesus?

How do we perceive God's actions or attitudes wrongly?

How do we twist or modify Jesus' teaching to allow us to get away with things, or to keep our prejudices?

Do we have false perceptions of God supporting our cause or viewpoint?

We think we can see the blind-spots of some white Christian churches in South African or in the southern states of the USA in their attitudes to blacks; but what of our own blind spots?

Maybe we have trouble in our comfortable, affluent society, accepting that sacrifice and suffering are part of following Jesus.

Or do we have wrong perceptions of what the church exists for and what our purpose is as Christians?

Palm Sunday raises a second issue, about the difference between a public celebrating faith and a personal suffering faith; between the comfort of a Sunday crowd and the challenge of being a lone Christian in our places of study or work, in our sporting or community groups. Much has been made of the 'about-face' of the crowd between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, about how fickle the crowd was. Yet we cannot be sure that it was the same crowd on both occasions while it was certainly the

same bunch of disciples. It was the disciples, not the crowd who were fickle. The disciples enthused the Palm Sunday pilgrims in support of Jesus but cowered before the henchmen who stirred up Pilate's crowd against Jesus. Were they only 'fair weather disciples'? It is clear that when Jesus was arrested in the Garden, all the disciples ran for cover, except for Peter and John who followed Jesus to his trial.

How fickle are we who gladly join in Sunday worship or housegroup or woman's fellowship, compared to situations at work, or among friends when Christian faith is mocked or fellow Christians are rubbished or the name of Jesus is used to swear with?

The risks and discomforts for us are only trivial compared with those the disciples faced.

When are we in danger of only being 'fair weather Christians'?

Finally, there is a related issue, the distinction between a group enthusiasm and truth; between the public face and personal faith.

It is easy to be caught up in the excitement, energy and relationships of a Christian group, whether Sunday worship, youth groups, camps, housegroups, women's fellowship and mission groups. This 'community' aspect is very important in Christian faith, as God does not mean us to be 'Lone Ranger Christians'. A Christian community is essential and particularly helpful in the early stages of Christian discipleship and for support in difficult times.

But the danger is that the group faith can become a substitute for developing our own personal faith and relationship with God. Like me, you may be aware of people who grew up in a Christian home, or who came into the church through their support in a time of personal crisis, but who later drift away from church. I've met people like this who have drifted out of St Albans.

I noticed this in people who came to faith or had their faith renewed in our Dannevirke Church but when they moved away to another town, did not make the commitment of getting into a new church elsewhere, and to work through the difficulties involved.

But the danger is that the group faith can become a substitute for developing our own personal faith- understanding and relationship with God. It can become a substitute for dwelling on God's word and allowing his truth to permeate our minds and to develop the mind of Christ within us; a substitute for opening our lives to the Holy Spirit and allowing him to lead our lives, so that like Jesus, we will pursue the Father's will, whatever the circumstances around us, whether it is Palm Sunday enthusiasm or Good Friday antagonism and hostility.

One of the weaknesses of the Easter season is that the two days of exciting celebration fall on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. But not many Christians attend the special services in between, which commemorate Jesus' pain and suffering for us. I remember a faithful Christian woman in Dannevirke telling me that she never came to a Good Friday service because it was just too sad. But without joining in Good Friday Services or Last Supper services on the Thursday night (Maundy Thursday), we may get the false impression that Christianity is a mountain top faith; moving from one celebration to another without a clear understanding of the pain and the power of Jesus' death for us, of what it cost Jesus to rescue us from our sinfulness and separation from God.

Easter Day does not erase the cross but vindicates and honours the cross, where Jesus had to suffer and die to be our Saviour. If our perfect Saviour suffered, how can we who are his followers expect anything else in our lives?

In this Holy week, let us keep aware of our Lord's struggle to stay true to his calling despite the wrong perceptions and fair-weather loyalty of his followers; and let us ask God to show us our wrong perceptions and to strengthen us to stay loyal to him in difficult situations.