

Palm Sunday

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Introduction

Greta Thunberg is famous for initiating her school strike on a Friday, a quiet, humble action which has now spread around the world. It is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to say it has changed the world, offered a new form of protest for young people and attracted considerable criticism from world leaders.

It can sometimes be instructive to think about those times when you have exercised authority, and especially if you have tried to do so in a quiet way or humble way, and to reflect on how effective that action was, and about how much conflict it may have given rise to.

Text

Matt 21:1–11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Comment

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem.

This is such a well known piece of the scriptural story that it can be easy to miss both the artistry and the intensity of this event. The lectionary presents Matthew’s depiction of the entry to Jerusalem. For Matthew — and for Luke and Mark — Jesus only come to Jerusalem once. Matthew and Luke have their birth stories; then some narratives about being launched into ministry (usually with a story of temptation); then the ministry of healing and freedom around Galilee; all with the eyes set to when Jesus would arrive in Jerusalem.

Jesus’ engagements with religious and imperial authorities raises curiosity and speculation during the Galilee ministry, but it’s totally understood that if Jesus ever went to Jerusalem that all hell might break loose.

In an artistic sense, it is a classic hero narrative. There is a hero, the hero has a message and/or a purpose; the hero is raising a reputation by doing some work; all the while people are wondering *What’s going to happen when the Hero gets to the City?* It may not be a city, it might be Mordor, or a showdown with Voldemort, or Oz or a hundred other locations where the new power of the hero confronts the established power that’s about to be challenged.

Matthew, Mark and Luke’s gospel all hinge on this, and many people do not know the synoptic gospels do not portray Jesus entering and leaving Jerusalem throughout his ministry. It is only John’s gospel — which has a very different narrative structure — that depicts Jesus in and out of Jerusalem throughout the three years of his public ministry.

For Matthew, here, Jesus has been building up a reputation — in word and deed — and is now arriving in a place of conflict, a place where his bold message, a radical reading of an ancient Covenant is going to be in direct confrontation both with those who are in current religious authority as well as with the imperial force who are in political and national authority. Authority of one clashes with the authority of others.

Jesus enters humbly — this adjective is so important in the text — on the back of an animal, and he is given a welcome of two stories: the welcome of a king, but the welcome of a humble king, sitting, as the prophets had dreamed, on the back of a work animal. This is no entry on a stallion, but a depiction of a way of undoing, reframing, de-escalating an expected conflict. Jesus’ approach to this great city is in the name of a demure demonstration of his mass appeal; but it has the opposite affect — it escalates rather than deescalates the tension.

There is a detail — which presumably has been obvious to many — in this text that has perturbed readers for centuries. The disciples are told to get two animals — a donkey and a colt —

“they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.”

What did Jesus sit on? The donkey? The colt? Could he have sat on both at the same time? Did he swap halfway through the triumphal entry? Ancient scholars saw that one of the animals represented Jews and the other represented Gentiles. Calvin was the first to recognise the usage of a literary device whereby a singular is spoken of in the plural in order to place emphasis on the singular. This literary technique rejoices in the easily remembered term: *parallelismus membrorum*. Try it out with your friends.

Literary devices aside, Jesus’ depiction as a humble arrival is the point. His humility is the very thing that astounds the people, deepens their attention towards him and attracts aggression from those who see that their position and roles and authorities are going to be undermined by this new attention towards a Galilean upstart. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus seems fully aware of this. He requisitions animals like a monarch would, and his arrival draws high drama, and he seems to know that he is on his way to his death. The escalating conflict that many are expecting — and perhaps even eagerly expecting — is undone by his refusal to command his followers to take up arms.

Humble — *praus* in Greek — can also be translated as meek, kind, benevolent, gentle, forgiving. This, and particularly this, seems to be a major point of intervention to the expected conflict of Jerusalem. Jesus arrives, and a power-off is expected, but the approach taken is one of humility, meekness, kindness, benevolence, gentleness and forgiveness. Jesus is no wallflower; he is confident in his critique, but his power is used to gather in those who’ve been dispossessed, rather than inciting revolution.

Taking this approach towards expected conflicts in Jerusalem did not mean that Jesus avoided conflict; in fact it escalated them. But it meant that he maintained his own integrity in the conflict. The escalation did not cause him to lose control of the conflict values that mattered most. This cost him his life, but for him, this was a price worth paying.

Response

It might be an interesting thing to bring in demonstrations — from the news, or from local stories — of people using humility in their approach to expected conflicts. Obviously, it’s always easy to find those who enjoy escalating conflicts, but contemporary examples of humility would be interesting.

Such examples will, despite their humility, cause debate: just because someone adopts a manner that’s subversive and mild doesn’t mean all — or even many — will agree with their aims. But this will be even more informative. Jesus, too, had large appeal, but caused deep division.

Prayer

Humble Jesus,
You arrived into a city like a peasant and a king

and lit a fuse that you knew was waiting for a light.
And it didn't save you from anything.
When we walk into conflict,
help us find the approach that's true.
Not because it'll give surety
but because it has integrity.
just like you.

Amen.

Season: Lent

Themes: