

Palm Sunday

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

We are in a particular geography for Palm Sunday. We hear of Jesus approaching Jerusalem, passing through Bethphage and Bethany, as well as the Mount of Olives and the Temple. These names are so associated with passiontide events in our minds that it can sometimes be difficult to see these as villages and towns with their own stories: scandals, markets, griefs, births, changes, festivals, delights, marriages, family feuds.

Palm Sunday comes, this year, into a world that is busy with so much else. So many of us are coping with the awful complexities of Covid. And, on top of that, many are dealing with the ongoing trauma of systemic oppression: racism, misogyny, ageism.

What can come among the difficulties of our lives that might cause us to stop, and look, and say Hosanna, say Blessed? In difficult lives it can be difficult to know where to look for hope. As we enter into this Palm Sunday, we invite you to take a little time to consider what it is that holds your gaze in troubled times.

Text

Mark 11:1–11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Comment

The Gospel of Mark is famous for its depiction of Jesus’ reticence. *The Messianic Secret* it’s named – you’ll find books and books exploring this feature in Mark in theological libraries. A healing from the first chapter can serve as a useful reminder:

“See that you tell no one anything, but go show yourself to the priest...”

Explanations abound: Jesus wished his status to be revealed in works, not words; Jesus wished to be able to move about safely; Jesus is portrayed as a type of Odysseus, a figure from Greek mythology who also disguised his identity... each explanation has a lot of richness to it.

Whatever the explanation about Jesus’ secrecy for much of the Markan narration, his arrival into Jerusalem is a marked end to this secrecy. Whereas up until now it is demons that proclaim “I know who you are! the Christ of God” (and even they were silenced), it is now the population of Jerusalem who shout and praise and wave palms, laying their cloaks down so that Jesus can enter a city on a colt. This is an inauguration from the people by the people. This entrance is not orchestrated by pomp and ceremony, it is not choreographed by someone with threats on the other end of the symbology; rather, it is one that emerges organically. Jesus’ reputation — despite all of his secrecies — has spread like wildfire. The people are looking to him, more than likely for some kind of deliverance from the Roman Empire, the Emperor of which could only *dream* about a rapturous spontaneous welcome such as this, rather than one that had to be organised with the threat of sword, or — worse, so much worse — a cross.

Jesus’ certitude and authority are shown clearly too. He tells his disciples where to procure a colt — one that has never been ridden — and gives them an explanation that is as vague as it is assertive: “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” Whatever the personal stories of mystification among the owners of the animal — or the animal itself — what we are seeing here is a sense of embodied authority. Authority is a thread throughout Mark — the destructive lust for it by empire and the intuitive embodiment of it by Jesus. (For a study of the theme of authority in Mark, you can read through: 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28, 29, 33)

Much conflict can gather around the question of authority. Think of some recent conflicts you’ve been aware of, or part of. People might say “Who do they think they are telling me what to do?” or “I wish they’d just do their job and manage” or “They are listening to the wrong people” or “The way they act at work, it’s criminal” ... The experience of being on the receiving end of an authority that you deem too authoritative, presumptive or ineffective can get deep into the psyche.

Another side of the equation is also true: it can be a crisis to be seen to have authority. Many people in religious leadership may feel like people look at them as if they have authority, but they might say they have *title* but no actual *authority*. It can be a crisis to be in power, as much as it can be a crisis to detect it. Some people

abdicate the authority they have. Others assume authorities they don't have. The world unfolds. It is evening, it is morning, the next day.

Even the final verse of this week's text is a curious one. Jesus has arrived into Jerusalem and, no sooner than he arrives he is greeted with spontaneity and joy; a spectacle he has had a part in arranging (by using the drama of a colt; a challenge perhaps to the stallions of the emperor)... And then, quietly, quickly, he visits the temple, looks at everything, and as it is late, he leaves and returns to Bethany, a place from which he will operate (see 11:12 and 14:3) in the coming days.

The Jesus of Mark — and, it must be said, the Jesus of the six weeks of our Lenten series — has been one who has gone back and forth in terms of his public and private life. He seeks to be in control, directed neither by either empire nor ego, populism nor popularity. He — and, it seems, he alone — understands the lonely sacrifices he will face. And he keeps his eye on those, using authority not as a means to its own end, but as a way of moving on towards what he sees is his call, his voice, his vocation. Authority is a tool, not a goal, in this gospel. It is a sign, a sign pointing towards something not itself. For Jesus, it is a pathway towards liberation, although even that is misunderstood: many, for very understandable reasons, saw liberation from empire as the goal, whereas Jesus saw a more complex liberation, one that would deepen his loneliness, and his call.

Response

What are the authority-related conflicts you're living with these days? Some of those will be small, some of those will be large.

What is at the heart of the question of authority for you in these conflicts? Is it that someone is abusing authority? or not using it? Is it that someone has an idea of what *you* should be doing with the authority they think you have? Is it something entirely different?

In all of these conflicts, it is wise to pay attention to the conflict about the conflict, too.

What are ways you can share the burden of this? Perhaps it is only by telling the story, and this may seem small, but may still help a little. We wish you well, in all the conflicts you live with, hoping they may be sites of safety.

Prayer

Jesus,

person of privacy and publicity
popular — for a while — but not populist;
you held your centre,
based on what you understood to be your call.

Help us to hear a call,
not to greatness, or grandiosity,
not to position or prominence
but to the deepest call of all:
love, creativity and justice.

May this carry us, through
the lauds and lamentations
of our lives.

And may we be faithful to love, creativity
and justice, as you were.

Amen.

Further Reading

Some opportunities you may wish to know about:

For Holy Week, there are some options we'd like to share with you. The Iona Community are inviting people to join them for their Holy Week celebrations. [More details on their website here.](#)

For the Wednesday of Holy Week – 7–9pm on March 31st – some British and Irish theologians are giving an overview of a new book from SCM Press 'When Did We See You Naked?' a justice based theological enquiry into the crucifixion. [You can register for this free event here.](#) A note for anyone interested in this: the event will pay attention to instances of torture and sexual violence both in biblical texts and contemporary news.

Pádraig Ó Tuama will be giving an online day-retreat with the New York City 'Church of the Heavenly Rest' on March 27th. This is from 10am–12pm; 2pm–4pm (New York City time). *On March 27th, those times correspond to 2pm–4pm; 6pm–8pm GMT (Europe doesn't enter Daylight Savings Time until March 28th, hence the four-hour time difference, not five).* [You can register for this Zoom event here.](#)

As mentioned before, the Corrymeela Podcast is offering interviews considering Irishness and Britishness – and, on a deeper level, considering questions of belonging, history, politics, art and religion – for twelve episodes. You can subscribe to The Corrymeela Podcast on [Apple](#), or [Spotify](#), or [listen directly online](#).