

**Sixth Sunday in Lent 6 Year B;
the Second Sunday of the Passion; Palm Sunday**

We are now in the season known as Passiontide. This Sunday is Palm Sunday. The Lectionary provides for two focal themes: the Entry into Jerusalem; and the Passion.

The Entry into Jerusalem

Mark 11: 1-11

There is rich history behind this story, but it is complex, involving many episodes from the past. Mark's version records three elements: a king riding a donkey; branches strewn on the road; and cries of Hosanna.

Our study of this story raises some quite serious questions about its details. Mark records only this visit to Jerusalem, whereas the other evangelists mention several visits, including a variety of major festivals. When, therefore, was the agreement reached between Jesus and the owner of the donkey?

Why were pilgrims arriving so early for a festival that did not take place until five days later? Were the cheering crowds really pilgrims already in the city, or were they simply Jesus' entourage on his journey south? Given the potentially inflammatory nature of the acclamations accorded Jesus on this triumphal entry, why is there no mention of this incident in the later trial? It would have provided a robust prosecution case!

We turn now to the historical precedents. The king riding a donkey echoes Zechariah 9:9 (those who love Handel's Messiah will recognise this as the source of "Rejoice greatly"). (See also the alternative gospel, below.) The palm branches present us with more of a problem. Waving of palms is associated with other festivals – Succoth (Tabernacles) and Hannukah – but not with Passover. Pilgrims usually walked at least the final stages of their journey; riding on a donkey, therefore offers a contrast to walking, rather than to riding on a more splendid animal. Cries of Hosanna were signals of welcome to pilgrims, congratulating them on completing their journey. To link them with celebrations of the Son of David is stretching a point.

So, what are we to make of this story? As so often, we need to ask the right question: not did it happen this way, but what did it mean to its first witnesses that they felt it appropriate to describe the events in this way? To quote a beloved Christmas hymn: "The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in Thee ...".

Or John 12: 12-16

There is little need to repeat what we have already said in respect of Mark's account. John makes explicit the link with Zechariah 9:9, and he also describes the disciples' later reflections on what they have just seen – which may give us a clue as to how this story took its present shape.

Ps 118: 1-2, 19-24

This Psalm will be used again on Easter Day – next Sunday.

The Passion

Isa 50:4-9a

This passage is the first of the so-called “Servant Songs”, describing the fate of the obedient and faithful servant of God who does not resist arrest but rather embodies Jesus’ own directions to “turn the other cheek”, knowing he will not (ultimately) be put to shame.

Is there here a word of encouragement to those inclined to “take the long view” – which is perhaps what all Christians talk of “end times” (even of resurrection) is really about.

Ps 31: 9-16

The psalmist feels himself under the watchful and sour gaze of his enemies, and even of his friends (v11) – a situation not calculated to enhance his well-being. It is a situation to which many in our world will have become accustomed already through unemployment and homelessness.

The key word here, surely is found in verses 14 and 15: “You are my God. My times are in your hands”.

Phil 2: 5-11

The late Revd Dr Donald English, leading devotions one morning at the Methodist Conference of 1990, spoke of this passage as resembling a parabola. Down, down, down it goes through verses 5-8, then it rises up again through verse 9-11. The key is that the rising, the lifting up, the upward soaring of the parabola, is thanks to God.

This is so polished, so considered a piece of writing that many believe it to have been a very early Christian hymn that Paul quoted or adapted for his present purpose. It has given rise to one of the key teachings of the church about Jesus, that he emptied himself of divinity (v7) in order to become human for our sake. We sing of it in a favourite hymn, 216: “Emptied himself of all but love”.

The Gospel

The gospel set in this option for Palm Sunday comprises the whole of chapter 14 and 15 – a vast body of text drawn from the key gospel for Year B, that of Mark. The variations suggest it could be divided into three parts: Mark 14: 1-72, Mark 15: 1-39 and Mark 15: 40-47

Mark 14: 1-72

Like the early chapters of Mark, this chapter reads like the screenplay of a movie, cutting between the action surrounding Jesus himself, and the machinations of Judas.

Jesus' response to the anointing at Bethany could hardly be read in any other way than as a recognition that Jesus' own death is indeed imminent.

The last supper follows (vv 12-25), then to the Mount of Olives with the whole company (save one!), and then with his very closest associates to the Garden called Gethsemane (vv 26-42). Jesus is arrested and taken first to the house of the High Priest (vv 53-65). The hearing is a complete shambles, with "bent" witnesses and a judge who is struggling to engineer the outcome he wants. Meanwhile (vv 66-72) Peter's courage fails, and he denies the Lord.

Mark 15: 1-39

A brief debate at dawn follows, and Jesus is taken to the Procurator's palace – a distance of barely a couple of hundred yards. (It is very interesting to look at a scale map of Jerusalem at this period and see how very small was the stage on which these events unfolded.)

Pilate is reported (vv 6-15) as offering to Jesus' accusers the option of releasing him under a Passover amnesty scheme, but they will have none of it. So Pilate hands Jesus over (a key phrase) to be crucified. The soldiers detailed to carry out the crucifixion make fun of this prisoner. Just as political cartoonists will look for details in the face of a new leader that can be exaggerated in their satirical work, so here the soldiers find a ready target in Jesus alleged pretensions to kingship.

The Crucifixion itself is told with some key details – the wine mixed with myrrh, for example – which suggest that Jesus spurns any attempt to ease the physical distress of his fate. There is a "conversation" with the two bandits (so NRSV). Taunts about his claimed kingship continue.

The end comes quickly – far more quickly than is often the case, as people could hang on a cross for days before succumbing. Jesus' "words from the cross" remain, understandably, the objects of Christian meditation. It is like gazing into the blackness of a very deep, unfathomable pool; if we are patient we see ourselves.

It is left to the centurion in charge of the execution detail to grasp and articulate the meaning of it all. "Truly this man was God's Son."

Mark 15: 40-47

Mark records that only a tiny handful of Jesus' followers – and all of them women – were watching Jesus' final agonies.

Finally, in this chapter, Mark introduces Joseph of Arimathea, who is given authority to remove the body before nightfall, so as to avoid desecrating the

Sabbath. Jesus' body is laid in a tomb, watched from a safe distance by those faithful women.