

Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem: Trinity, 31 October 2021

Mark 11: 1 - 11

Great story, isn't it? - and a good one to tell the children. When we stay with it, though, there is a disturbing edge to it - and it definitely contains warnings for us today.

A brief comment on the text itself, just to clear the ground. The story is covered by all four gospels, and the details differ slightly between them. If we add the accounts together, there are four features: the donkey episode, cleansing the temple, Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, and the cursing of the fig tree.

Matthew has the disciples fetching a donkey AND her colt; Mark and Luke mention only the colt, and John writes of a young donkey, the common feature being that the animal has not been broken in. Matthew, Mark and Luke cover the cleansing of the temple:- Matthew and Luke put it at the point when the procession entered Jerusalem, while our passage in Mark has it happening on the next day. All but John have Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, but each in a separate passage from this story; and only Matthew and Mark mention the fig tree episode.

Experts in forensic evidence are more than satisfied that the slight differences in the gospel records prove their reliability as accounts of what happened: if two witnesses in a trial today say precisely the same words when giving evidence it is grounds for suspicion. The Bible writers wrote their stories rather differently from what we are used to. But actually, even our own history books select themes and deal with them in turn, which means that their accounts do not, so to speak, start at January 1 and proceed in date order to December 31. In fact, I have at home an account of his own life by a now-retired famous organist who spent years at York Minster: he writes in strict chronological order, and the result is incredibly tedious! In addition, only two, possibly three, of the gospel writers could actually have been there; and they wrote to bring out different aspects, and had different readers in mind. For example, Matthew, with his concern to show Jesus fulfilling prophecy, is quoting his "donkey AND colt" almost exactly from Zechariah 9: 9: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey". And the crowds and Pharisees clearly recognised immediately what Jesus was doing: it didn't need explaining to them.

In the gospels, Jesus has been travelling to Jerusalem for some while before this story happens, and it is a momentous journey: the tension and danger are building. It is clear that during these few days he stayed in Bethany, probably with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and walked the short distance into Jerusalem each day. But the striking feature of Mark's account that we read earlier is the huge sense of anticlimax. There's all the build-up, with everybody shouting his praises, children having a great time, and Jesus confirming to his critics at the roadside that this event was inevitable - remember what he said to them, as recorded by Luke? "If

these folk kept quiet, the very stones would cry out!” So what happens when he arrives, when he actually gets there after all this build-up? He looks round at everything and - goes home. What?!? And what did the crowd do then?

Let's look at it from the crowd's viewpoint. What would the ideal sequel have been? In "Box Set" terms: Series 1 finishes as the donkey comes through the gate - and we can't wait for the release of Series 2 - how will it start? The thing is: ever since the start of Jesus' public activities, the crowds who followed him had misunderstood what he was actually about. They had loved the miracles, and a huge number of ordinary people had been healed. This man Jesus from Nazareth had made a huge difference to their daily lives. The man whose house had a large hole in the roof had doubtless got the builders in by now, and the undertaker at Nain must have decided what to do with the good-as-new coffin returned as surplus to requirements... But through it all, the vast majority had failed to grasp his teaching about himself. They loved listening to him, mind: even those men sent to arrest him were spellbound by his words. Just think: - you listen to preachers, even the very best of them, those who bring you God's truth as purely, faithfully, compassionately and rivetingly as you've ever heard the Word: but that experience doesn't come anywhere near what it must have been like to listen to Jesus himself. *"This crowd have been with me for three days and have run out of food..."*

But even the close disciples hadn't got the message, and we remember all too clearly their dismal record from this point in the story until the arrest and trial - and it makes us feel guilty too, doesn't it?

So what would have been a suitable end to the donkey story? How, in their minds, should it have played out? Well, this brings in their fierce national pride, and the humiliation of being ruled by the Romans: THAT was what the Messiah was going to sort out - set Israel up again as a sovereign nation and defeat the occupying enemy, just as God had done several times in the past. Remember the army of Sennacherib lying dead in their siege tents after the angel of the Lord had visited them during the night? Well, bring it on, Lord - that's what we believe in as your great mission. And it must have been horribly painful for them when nothing like that happened. They must have been so disappointed. Then we know how the crowd was worked on by the religious leaders to demand Barabbas' release and Jesus' death, not many days afterwards - we don't know, of course, that they were the same people as the ones with the palm branches, but it's a reasonable assumption. Crowds can be very fickle.

In effect, the people had in their own minds made Jesus into the Saviour and leader they wanted; and when he taught them and his disciples what he was really about it provoked hostility, bewilderment and a sort of selective hearing and memory: they just couldn't take it in. I said at the beginning that the story contains warnings for us today, and this is where it begins to cut.

Those people were well-taught in the scriptures as a matter of course, which is why they understood immediately the significance of the riding on a donkey. The danger is particularly for those of us, like me, who have been brought up in Christian families and taught Bible stories from an early age: we know so much, and although we have (I hope) learned to distrust the old pictures of Jesus with flowing blond hair, western colouring and a white dressing-gown, we will all have formed some kind of picture of what he's like. Many years ago someone I knew was having an argument with a teenager about the length of his hair: a hot topic in my old church. The teen said "Well, Jesus had long hair", and my friend replied, "No he didn't, he shaved his head." To which the boy countered, "Where did you get that from?", only to be told: "Exactly the same place where you got the long hair idea"!

Of course we won't know what he actually looks like - until that lovely prophecy comes true: "they shall see his face"! That will be amazing beyond words, won't it? But meanwhile we do have a fairly well-defined idea of Jesus' character, and of what his will is for us in a general way. Even more, we love him, even if more feebly than we know we should. The tragedy is: so, in their way, did the people on the road to Jerusalem - and they were heading for a cataclysmic disaster, because they had got it wrong. The Bible is clear that if since coming to Jesus I have wasted my time, or been building the wrong things into his church, then at the end I will be saved, but like someone escaping through the flames - that's 1 Cor.3: 15. We can believe we've got a reasoned, balanced idea of Jesus' ways and will, and all the time get it seriously wrong.

Remember, too, Jesus healing the woman with the incurable haemorrhage. All the crowd that day were very close to Jesus - jostling him, in fact; but one woman touched him, and he knew it. So it's unfortunately possible to associate with Jesus but never engage with him. And if your association with Jesus and church is just a casual one, and you have put off any definite decision to give in and submit to Jesus, then I have to tell you that your situation is very serious. Not for nothing did Jesus shed tears over Jerusalem, and say that "Your house is left to you desolate" - **your** house, note: they thought it was God's Temple! And 40 years later the Roman army arrived. . .

Look, all of you, my brothers and sisters in Christ: there are things on which we take different views, and some of these matters feel as if both views can't be right. When Paul writes to the Corinthians that we should be "perfectly united in mind and thought", he doesn't want clones (thank God). But he does mean, earlier in the same verse (1 Cor. 1: 10), that we should agree that there be no divisions among us. Remember Jesus asking: "*What was it you were discussing among yourselves along the way?*"

So it's a deeper concern than carbon-copying each other's line on every imaginable subject: it's an over-riding concern that our lives humbly honour his word and fit in with God's purposes for his people, in the place and time in human history where he has seen fit to place us. The Corinthians passage applies to church, wherever we are in membership, but it has to start with our individual selves, which is what we are looking at today. God grant us the humility, and confidence in him, to examine our own spiritual health in his presence.

This is all rather sombre: is there any encouragement in this story? Yes, there is: the donkey! G K Chesterton's famous poem got the idea:- I won't read all of it, but listen to this:-

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Actually, there is no "Little Donkey" in the Christmas story in the Bible: but there is definitely one here! None of the gospels tell us what happened to it at the end of the ride, but Mark mentions that the disciples were told to promise, when collecting it, that it would be sent home again afterwards, as we read earlier. So what is it about this endearing little animal that touches us today?

Partly that it was a bit of a misfit, and needed breaking-in! St Francis used to refer to his own body as "Brother Ass" - and don't we have our rough edges? Put our foot in it? But the really crucial and encouraging point is this: it submitted to Jesus, and carried him exactly where he wanted to go, and when its job was done it went safely home again. It's not a bad ambition to be Jesus' donkey when he needs one.