

Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday is the day that we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey just days before he was crucified. It caused an uproar, people cut down palm branches and others threw their coats on the ground in front of Jesus. Jesus rode a Donkey, a symbol of peace, but actually this was a big deal, people cried out Hosanna, which is a funny word – it means He saves or God saves, it was a celebration but also a provocation.

Jesus entered into the political centre of the country, he made himself visible to the Romans and audible to King Herod, there was no going back after Palm Sunday.

Have you ever experienced something that **wasn't what it seemed**, maybe you went to a movie and it just wasn't that good, or you went to a party reluctantly and met up with a whole pile of old friends and it was great. I know a couple of years ago when mum died we were able to take our kids to Scotland, and it was January and we drove to near the Isle of Skye where my grandfather was born. I expected snow and no access, but it was so much better, we got to the district, the town and quite possibly the house that granddad was born in.

The triumphant entry into Jerusalem **was not what it seemed**, I think the people of Jerusalem thought they were celebrating the coming of a saviour, someone who would lead a rebellion and get rid of Herod and the Romans. In the books of Maccabees, we can read how this had happened in the past. But Jesus wasn't what they expected, instead of a political leader, he wanted something deeper, hearts and minds. He founded a kingdom that would outlive his death and spread around the world like a wildfire. Yet at the time the people were disappointed, he wasn't what they thought. **Not what it seemed.**

So at first when Jesus came into Jerusalem it seemed like the entrance of a coming political/military saviour and so there was great shouting. The first view. Then people later realised that Jesus wasn't going to be that sort of saviour, and to some extent that was why the crowds later shouted crucify him. Because they were disappointed. A second view. **Not what it seemed.** But at a third level, this was the ultimate arrival, this was the King of Glory, come humble to the Holy City just before he was to make the sacrifice which didn't overcome the Romans, it overcame Death, his victory was over sin and death. The great victory. I love the line, if the people were silent even the stones would cry out.

On a surface level this event was like a political rival coming into a great city just before he was banned by the powers that be; like Nelson Mandela coming into the Capetown before he was banned, like Ghandi's salt march, like Dame Whina Cooper's landmarch.

But the entry into Jerusalem, the week before the first Easter was so much more, from a spiritual point of view, it was the Trojan horse, it looked like one thing – but it was another.

Let me summarise it this way; as Christians we believe that God is the creator of all things, of natural order of human society, of law and order. God is the great law-giver. But we also recognise that all human laws and governmental systems have flaws, God gave Moses the ten commandments but Moses was a flawed leader, as were the Judges, as was King David, and every leader and system since; as Churchill summed it up, "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...."

So while John describes Jesus as the Word, the logos, Bonhoeffer said Jesus is simultaneously also the counter-logos, the opposition to all human authority, he is the challenge to a state claiming too much power, to a church when it abuses its members, to a police force or army flexing its muscles – Jesus is

the counter-logos, and we see this on Palm Sunday. Jesus is the challenge, the opposition, the other king on a donkey, and the question mark to all our plans.

Palm Sunday reminds us that there is another King and another Kingdom that demands our deep loyalty. The contrast can be seen in the second verses of Princess Dianna's favourite hymn, I vow to thee my country. The first verse is a jingoistic poem, but the second remembers something bigger. Listen to a few lines.

I vow to thee, my country
the service of my love;
The love that asks no questions,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

And there's another country,
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.

You see Jesus is always counter-logos to jingoistic nationalism.

Ok let's look at how different people saw Palm Sunday.

The crowd, many of them would have heard of Jesus the miracle worker and they were looking for a political saviour, maybe they weren't sure exactly how it would play out, but they must have thought they were seeing the start of a revolution.

The disciples, I think they were confused, Jesus was talking about death and glory, perhaps Simon the Zealot was thinking – at last, now we are getting somewhere. Perhaps some of the disciples were worried, this will cause trouble, perhaps others were just excited that the crowds even in the cities were now following Jesus.

Herod the Jewish King would have been trembling, he did not want trouble, he did not sit easily on his throne, despite all the money he spent he knew people did not like him and here is this upstart from the provinces and people seemed to love him.

Pilate, the Roman Governor he would have been worried, trouble like this could get back to Rome and his task was to keep people quiet. He would be looking for a way to take this guy out quietly. Don't cause trouble, Pilate knew what Rome expected.

How do you see Palm Sunday?

There are two symbols you might have missed here. One the **palm branches**, these were symbols of victory, they came out after a military victory – so Palm Sunday was more provocative than you might think. They would be like wearing your chief's scarf in Auckland, or a blue jacket to a Mongrel Mob Convention.

Then **the donkey**, often we see that as very humble, it was humble but it was not unusual, it was a common symbol of a king coming in peace, in war you came on a stallion, in peace on a donkey. The donkey looked humble, but was a symbol for king – **Not what it seemed.**

Now Mark gives a lot of space in the story to the process of finding the donkey, go and take this donkey that has never been ridden. So Jesus must have been a good horseman. If anyone asks you "say the master has need of it". That must have been a bit dangerous, horse stealing has always been a major offence. When it says "the master" I guess people might have known that meant Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I struggle to do things that embarrass me, that put me out there – but the disciples do what they are told. It's a bit like asking for help, or asking for directions, as blokes we hate asking for help. But during this lock down we are going to need to ask for help.

I guess the best example I can think of today might be asking a stranger if you could borrow their brand new Range Rover. There are some things you just don't ask. Maybe Jesus is looking to you today and saying – ask for help – ask to borrow the donkey.

There is a prophesy about this event in Zechariah 9.9

Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; cry out, daughter of Jerusalem!
Look! Your king is coming to you. He is righteous, and he is able to save.
He is humble, and is riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

This is a prophesy of the coming king, gentle, able to save, this a prophesy that talks of the great plan of salvation. Jesus has come to save individuals – to save souls, to create a new community – to save people into the church, and to begin to redeem human society as a whole, in fact to heal the whole created order. Jesus is announcing that he is the true King.

Ok, so where did Jesus walk? The triumphant entry started at Bethany outside the city, Jesus then walked to Bethphage where it seems the disciples found the donkey, maybe this was provided by a secret disciple, or maybe just a trusting citizen, the route then went over the mount of Olives and past the garden of Gethsemane, down into the Kidron Valley and then up to city entering through the Golden Gate into the city and perhaps the Beautiful Gate into the temple. These are roughly in a line coming from the East. We are told it was then late, so it seems Jesus spent quite a while travelling just a few miles. It must have been a bit like a Christmas Parade with just one float. Again because it was late Jesus went home again.

So what does this mean to us today. An event that was not what it seemed, or maybe it was exactly what it seemed.

First, it reminds us that Jesus is a King of Sorts, he demands our loyalty and calls us to follow him. It reminds us that he cannot be tied to any one party, or leader, or even system of government, Jesus is not a member of the Labour Party, nor the Republican Party, or the Tories, nor the Chinese Communist Party, he is not left wing nor right wing, – whatever our politics he demands a higher loyalty to him and his kingdom.

Second, I wonder whether we are missing something in the middle of the lockdown. I think many of us are hunkering down and hoping for it all to go away and then we can get back to life as normal. But that might not be the way. Things are changing and some will never go back to how they were. Things are not what they seem, I agree with the lockdown, but let us be very careful about the liberties we are asked to suspend for a time, tracking devices might come back to haunt us.

Third. HEALTH. Jesus walked and then rode into Jerusalem. In our time we put a huge emphasis on physical health, but spiritual resilience is even more important. Those who put their hope in health can have it shaken, our health is no guarantee against a disease that can strike down those of any age. Seriously we should be ready to meet our maker if our bodies do not survive this virus, have you made

peace with God and your family. Forgiveness is more important than physical fitness. The psalmist reminds us, number your days.

Fourth. WEALTH. – Donkey's - we often talk about the prosperity gospel, well the real evangelists of the prosperity gospel are not Brian Tamaki and friends, they are the pension funds and the merchants of debt. It is good to have some money put away for tomorrow, but we also need to think very carefully about today. We also need to think very carefully about not overstretching ourselves. What preventative action have we take today. The story of the rich fool is a story for our time, as is the proverbs warning to be no man's debtor. I really feel for Air NZ a fabulous business with great people and suddenly they just don't know what tomorrow will hold. What financial decisions do you need to make today to safeguard your future?

Fifthly. BUILDINGS. The temple. The security of a house, we have been told that we should get used to not owning our own houses, I think we are heading into a world where it will be important again to allow people to own their own house no matter how small, we should not be building our prosperity at the cost of allowing all members of our society a little space to call their own. For churches and many businesses, the opposite may be true, building's are not our salvation, a building is only useful if we build an equally strong social community.

Sixthly. ON-LINE. – NOT WHAT YOU EXPECTED. A year ago many of us were overly cautious and dismissing the online world as something untested, I think now we are all discovering that this new environment will have a very significant and important part in all our futures.

Seven. Is the planet fighting back, I think there is a serious reflection that we need to make that all natural systems have inherent protections built in, mammals have immune systems. Maybe planets do too? Maybe what we are experiencing is the planet having reached a point where one species is doing significant damage to the environment and nature is responding. In a blunt way, but an effective way. I know before this, I wasn't willing to give up my car or long distance travel by plane, because they were damaging the atmosphere, maybe we need to really rethink how we are treating the earth. Have you seen the way the virus has turned down pollution? But to quote the European public health alliance, *"chronic air pollution is a strong driver of lung and heart conditions, which are linked to higher Covid-19 death rates."*

Palm Sunday. Some things are not what they seem, or are they?