

Mark 11, verses 1-11

Woodstock

25 March 2018 (Palm Sunday)

10.30 a.m.

I wonder how we're all doing with Lent this year? Are you keeping the season well? Or not? I'm afraid that I'm not! I don't know if it was the lingering aftermath of winter flu and fluey colds, or the very unseasonal snow a couple of weeks ago, or some combination of other things, but I've found it quite difficult to get myself into the right frame of mind for Lent this year. Of course, the shops don't help, do they? There were Easter eggs in the supermarkets straight after Christmas, and our local baker's marked Shrove Tuesday by bringing out a massive tray of hot cross buns, and they've been stocking them ever since. So it's all been very confusing! I feel that Lent is almost over, and I've not really started properly! I shall hope to do better this week, and then next year!

Having not done Lent, I suppose I don't entirely deserve an Easter treat, but we've arranged one anyway! We're planning to go to London, to see the Charles I exhibition at the Royal Academy. You may have noticed it in the papers; you may have visited it yourselves. There was a television documentary about it a month or six weeks ago, explaining how it was that King Charles I acquired a remarkable collection of paintings and other works of art, how it was sold off after his execution in 1649, and how some of it has been painstakingly re-assembled for this special exhibition. Charles basically bought up a job lot of Old Masters from a bankrupt Italian duke, but he also added commissions of his own, including some very fine portraits of himself by the Dutch painter Sir Anthony Van Dyck. Van Dyck had the skill and the good sense to portray Charles I in a very flattering way, which is how he got a very good salary and a knighthood for his efforts. In real life Charles I was a very small man and pretty unimpressive, but you wouldn't guess that from the Van Dyck portraits, which make the king look, well, very regal, don't they!

Now, this wasn't just about royal ego. It was also about what we might call the theatre of power. Kings and queens needed to look the part, even if, on closer inspection, they didn't quite measure up – and of course, very few people actually got close enough to compare the image and the reality. Hence portraits and coins and statues. Hence palaces, with their state rooms and thrones. And it still happens. Powerful people arrange their surroundings to enhance their impact, whether that's Sir Alan Sugar sitting behind a big desk, firing people,

or Mrs May arriving in a motorcade with police outriders, or Mr Trump waving from the steps of Air Force One. It's all about the interplay between the image of power and the reality of power.

So, what about Jesus? What about the dramatic story we read today, from Mark's Gospel? This incident is sometimes called the Triumphal Entry, describing Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. What message is Mark trying to get across to us? What message is Jesus trying to convey? What does it all mean? That's our theme for this morning, and I want to think with you about three aspects of the story.

The first one is **Lowly Pomp**. I'm sure you recognise that phrase! Lowly Pomp. From Dean Milman's Palm Sunday hymn, 'Ride on, ride on in majesty', which we'll sing a little later on in our service. On this reading, Jesus is a king, true enough, but a king with a difference. He arrives on a donkey, not a great stallion. He is humble. And that message comes over in Mark's story – even more so if we compare Mark with Matthew and Luke. Mark's version of the Palm Sunday story is quite low key, quite under-stated. Matthew has a 'very large crowd' greeting Jesus as he arrives in Jerusalem. Luke goes one better, and he says that it's a 'multitude'. Mark just says 'many people'. In Luke, the Pharisees notice what is going on, and they object, telling Jesus to make the crowd be quiet. Jesus says: 'If these were silent, the very stones would shout aloud.' In Matthew, the whole city is in turmoil because of Jesus. In Mark, no-one seems to take much notice of Jesus, and Jesus drops in at the Temple and then he goes off for a quiet evening at Bethany and an early night.

Now, we mustn't overdo this. Riding into Jerusalem is a provocative thing to do. Arguably, it's staking a claim to royal authority or to a role as deliverer of the people. And crowds – even small ones - shouting 'Hosanna' – 'Save us' – and waving palm branches are bound to attract attention. 'Lowly pomp' probably wasn't how it looked to the authorities in Jerusalem, nervous about anything that might stir up unrest and provoke trouble. Nevertheless, Mark's story, more than Matthew's or Luke's, leaves room for people to wonder what to make of Jesus and how to respond to him.

And that's an important theme in this gospel, often expressed in the language of sight, of seeing. Some people 'see' – perceive – understand – what is going on, and some don't. For some the penny drops, and for some, it doesn't. Some people get it, and some people really

don't. Early on in the gospel Jesus explains to his puzzled disciples why he teaches in parables. He says that it's so that people will look, but not perceive; listen, but not understand. Strange! And just before today's story, as Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, he meets a blind man called Bartimaeus. 'What do you want me to do for you?' asks Jesus. And Bartimaeus says: 'Let me see again.' A very natural request, of course. But for Mark, we all need to 'see', to perceive, to understand, and then to respond by joining Jesus and following him. Mark leaves room for us to 'see', or not to see. That's the first thing.

The second is **Pursuing the Road**. If you have time this week, read through Mark's Gospel from start to finish. It won't take you very long – it's just twenty pages in this version of the Bible. It's really helpful to get a sense of the whole Gospel and of the rhythm of the story. And it's a good corrective to the way we tend to read in church, just taking little snippets from here and there and not connecting them into a proper narrative.

If you do get a chance to read the whole Gospel through, you may notice how much space Mark devotes to the final week in the life of Jesus. In my Bible, the Gospel starts on page 33; we reach Palm Sunday on page 45, and we have another eight pages to go until the end. So that's more than a third of the space, and only a little less than half, on just one week in Jesus' life. If this was a biography, we'd think that the balance was all wrong, wouldn't we! And actually we could bring the story even further back, because way before Jesus reaches Jerusalem he is talking about what is going to happen in that final week of his life. It's not for nothing that Mark's Gospel has been described as a Passion Story with a long introduction.

There's a sense, then, of an unfolding story building towards a climax. Jesus may be an itinerant teacher and preacher, but he isn't wandering aimlessly. He has a direction, a purpose. He is on the way. He knows where he is going. And this comes through in our reading today. Jesus is very much in control here, isn't he? There's the strange incident with the colt. How does that happen? Why do people let two strangers walk off with a colt? Are we to understand that Jesus had somehow pre-arranged it? Do we need an explanation? Or do we just conclude that Mark wants to underline that Jesus is driving events forward? In our passage today it's Jesus who is the subject of most of the active verbs. Jesus sends, says,

tells, goes, looks. Jesus is doing things, making things happen. He is following through with God's purpose, steadily and resolutely.

If you follow through with your reading of the gospel, in a couple of chapters' time you'll notice a striking change. In the middle of chapter 14, Jesus is arrested. And then, rather than Jesus doing things, things are done to Jesus. Jesus becomes the One who waits, the One who endures. That's something we are led to explore on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and on Holy Saturday, when Jesus waits in the tomb, and we wait too. But still we are within the purpose of God, to bring healing and forgiveness and new life to the world.

The third theme follows on from the first two, and it's **Riding on to Die**. Did you notice how our reading this morning finished? Let me remind you. Verse 11: '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.'

Hm. So what, you might say! If we compare this with Matthew and Luke, there's a difference. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, welcomed by the crowds, and he goes straight to the temple, and starts throwing out the moneychangers and the people selling animals for sacrifice. One dramatic story leads on to another. Triumphant entry; cleansing of the temple. Here, though, Jesus goes to the temple, and has a look around, but then goes away again. Almost a sense of Jesus looking at his watch, and deciding that it's a bit late in the day to start cleansing, so he heads out to Bethany for a quiet evening with the disciples. In Mark's account, Jesus comes back next day and throws out the moneychangers.

So what's happening here? Is Jesus maybe reconnoitring the temple, to see how the land lies? That would make sense, wouldn't it? One commentator suggests that maybe Jesus expected a warm welcome at the temple, following on from his arrival in Jerusalem, and he is rather deflated that no-one takes any notice of him. He's gone from the one who comes in the name of the Lord to just another pilgrim milling around in the temple courtyards.

I know that it's a risky undertaking to try to get into the mind of Jesus, and probably something we shouldn't do, but I don't think Jesus was expecting to be received at the temple with open arms. I think he hoped very much that people in Jerusalem, and the leaders of Israel, would respond positively to his message. I think he hoped that. And I think

that he came to Jerusalem in order to give them an opportunity to do so. He desperately wanted people to hear and receive his message, and to become what God had always wanted them to be. But I also think that Jesus expected that they wouldn't. He thought that appealing to the people was a very long shot, and he was reckoning on rejection. He was pretty sure that his willingness to offer his life would be taken up. And maybe that's why he needed some quiet time with his friends to prepare for the next act in the drama of the Passion.

Whether we've got on well with Lent this year or not, over the next few days we'll have an opportunity to read and reflect on the story of Holy Week, and to be reminded of the extraordinary love of God, focussed in Jesus Christ. I hope and pray that we will find time to take in the story, and to realise what it means for us. May God bless us all in this Passiontide, and at Easter. Amen.