

Same But Different

March 28, 2021

By Rev Paul Graham

Read Mark 11:1-11



Last year on Palm Sunday, I [wrote](#) about how the procession into Jerusalem might have looked like in what was then our first COVID-19 lockdown. This year, we are again at Palm Sunday (albeit a couple of weeks earlier due to the vagaries of the full moon), tentatively looking forward from our third lockdown of the pandemic.

What world would Jesus encounter if he walked the streets of Clare today? What welcome would he get in the town (or indeed any community)? Would he even be noticed?

Let's have a look at the first Palm Sunday to see what clues we find there that might help us see what we could carry forward with us to today.

Jesus was entering Jerusalem at a crucial time of the year. The Jewish people would have been counting down the days to Passover, the time when freedom from slavery was celebrated and commemorated, particularly pertinent to them under the rule of the Roman Empire. True, the Romans allowed a certain

degree of freedom; they were free to worship at the Temple, appoint rulers (albeit with strings attached) and go about their daily lives without the constant threat of the invaders getting too free and easy with their swords. In fact, as Monty Python reminded us, life was in many practical ways easier for the locals: improvements in sanitation, roads and, most importantly, personal safety, were not to be sniffed at.

But there were limits to their freedom. The Roman authorities' savage and brutal treatment of the last person who had called themselves the Messiah was still fresh in their memories^[1] and the message there was clear: the Romans didn't take kindly to someone getting above their station and status, whether this was politically or theologically. The Emperor was God in Roman eyes, and anyone who claimed otherwise wouldn't have long to live to tell anyone else.

So Jesus was walking into a political bearpit. But he was also walking into a spiritual battleground. The problem was that his actions had stoked division among the permitted theological elite. The Sadducees were miffed (to say the least) that Lazarus was up and about again, believing, as they did, that there was no such thing as resurrection. Lazarus' continued re-animated existence was a blight on them. Equally, the Pharisees weren't happy with Jesus; throughout his ministry around the country, he had been continually poking at their inflated sense of self-importance, demonstrating by actions and in stories the straitjacket of law that they imposed upon others, and bringing into the harsh light of day their many and varied hypocrisies. Nothing gets a person's back up more than someone pointing out their failings, particularly when they derive so much pleasure (and make a tidy sum of dosh) in doing the same to others.

But then there was also the many-headed populace who were always on the lookout for the Next Big Thing in Messiahship. When any sniff of freedom from the Roman oppressors was detected, out would come the placard and palm branch wavers in force, hailing the latest one who would bring the prophecies to their fulfilment once and for all. Or so they thought.

There is so much here that is relevant to our current times that it's beyond the limits of this missive to even attempt to cover all the bases. We could, for example, compare and contrast the crowd with any number of protests that the world has seen in the past few months. Whether it is in the BLM marches of last summer, the infamous storming of the Capitol in Washington DC during January or any number of other protests that are anti-lockdown, anti-Bill, anti-Brexit or anti-Aunty (I made that one up, I hope), we see how crowds will gather under a common cause to make sure that their feelings are unequivocally heard for better or for worse. There is a *Father Ted* sketch that shows how mealy-mouthed protests can be, though I probably find myself aligned more to Fathers Ted and Dougal and their placards proclaiming, "Careful Now" and "Down With This Kind Of Thing"^[2] than the more aggressive protesters we have seen on TV in recent times.

Equally, we could look at the ruling party and ask questions in our current world about the reach of government and the enforcement of lockdown powers. It has been noted, for example, that the increase of neighbourliness that we have seen throughout the pandemic has been met with the opposite force of whistleblowing on those same neighbours if they dare flout the rule of six or any other measures put in place to try to limit the pandemic's spread and longevity, or so we are told.

And then, when it comes to hypocrisy akin to the Pharisees, there is really no end to the number of people we might want to point our fingers at. Just so long as we include ourselves in the accusations.

So, what are we to derive from our accompanying of Jesus into Jerusalem this time around? There is so much that has changed since last year, and even more from the year before that. Just think, two years ago we wouldn't have thought twice before hugging a loved one, or going into any number of shops, and those who wore face masks in any of our larger urban centres looked (frankly) a bit weird. Even in the time since last Palm Sunday many of us have become familiar with Zoom, Skype, Teams, etc as a main means of communication with colleagues, friends and family and felt the pain of not being able to see people at

all, let alone their legs and feet. We have travelled less, which has helped the planet breathe more easily again, but have felt more pain because of it.

But Palm Sunday centres around Jesus on his donkey, riding into the city that he would only a few days later be led out from and crucified. In doing this, Jesus was ushering in a new way for all; the servant King who didn't claim his throne in the palace but took his place at the feet of his disciples and washed away the mud and the muck of the streets. In entering Jerusalem, Jesus knew that the crowds would turn from shouts of joy to screams of hatred within a few short days and the hoof prints of the donkey would be obliterated by the imprint of the cross as he dragged it behind his whip-scarred back.

But Jesus did it to herald a new way of being, a new way of grace, remembered in bread and wine. What is new for us as we approach Easter and the future beyond? What is God saying to us about Jesus that we might never have considered before as we meet him afresh this week? And finally, are we willing to be challenged by Jesus in despair and hope, in death and in life, and through hate to love?

Amen.

[1] The Jewish historian Josephus lists at least four potential Messiah claimants contemporary to Jesus: a pair of Judases, Simon of Peraea and the wonderfully named Athronges the Shepherd, all of whom came to a sticky end, as did their followers (<https://jamestabor.com/messiahs-in-the-time-of-jesus/>)

[2] "The Passion Of Saint Tibulus", *Father Ted*, 1995 - a note that this episode, though funny, hasn't fared very well over the years.

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