

Palm Sunday

It was the most dangerous time of the year. That was why Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea, had left his comfortable palace at the seaside in Caesarea Maritima and had marched to Jerusalem with many hundreds of Roman soldiers. The Jewish nation was always volatile, but especially at the feast of the Passover – a time of heightened religious expectation and an intensely patriotic time when freedom from the slavery in Egypt was celebrated. Jerusalem would be filled to overflowing with tens of thousands of pilgrims. It was a time when many prayed in the Temple for the coming of the Messiah – a King like King David, a military leader – who would free Israel from Roman domination and make her great again.

It was then that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion! Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you! He comes triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey – on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Jesus was a king; he openly accepted the adulations of the crowd, but he was not an obvious king. Roman soldiers guarding the gates, did not rush to arrest him, fearing the beginning of a political revolt. His kingship brought peace, not war; healing, not destruction. His kingship was not forced on anyone – he came, and comes, as king to those who accept his kingship willingly. God respects the independence he has granted mankind. The Palm Sunday story leaves us in no doubt about Jesus’ resolution and determination. A challenge is thrown down before the city and the world. Will you have me as your king? Will you have me when you see the kind of king I am?

To my mind there is no doubt that Jesus made some arrangements for the Triumphal Entry. The donkey is ‘booked’ like a taxi. “The Master needs it” seems very much like a pre-arranged password. Have you noticed that he rode on a beast which had never been

ridden, and that the Gospels seem to suggest that Jesus walked everywhere? I wonder how he managed to control it and keep it calm as people shouted and waved branches near it! Perhaps that detail was put in to remind Jewish Christians that the Mishnah says: “no one may use an animal on which a king rides,” to remind them that Jesus had assumed a kingly prerogative.

“The Master needs it.” Jesus needed the donkey to carry out his planned entry into Jerusalem. Today he needs you and me to carry on his work here on Earth. He needs our time, our talents and our service. He will never force us – we have to be willing to make ourselves available. Sometimes we forget that point because we think that we have little or nothing to give. God does not ask us to save the world, He asks us only to be faithful and to let Him use what we have to His glory. Let us be God’s donkeys!

There is the story of a man walking along an exotic beach that was littered with hundreds of starfish, after a storm. Coming towards him he noticed a young lad occasionally stooping and throwing something into the sea. Up close he saw that the boy was throwing starfish into the water. “You are wasting your time” the man said, “there are hundreds of starfish stranded here.” The boy picked up a starfish and threw it into the sea. “Made a difference to that one!” he said.

We must not rush this week to Easter Day. We begin with our “Hosannas” and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” because Jesus comes as King. But we must follow him carefully, marking his rejection, pain, mockery and death. The King will be crowned with thorns.

Allan Procter Reader Emeritus