

Fickle Crowds

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 31:9-14 | Philippians 2:5-11 | Mark 11:1-11, 15:1-39

MARK 11:1-11

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' 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.

I will be brief this morning as I was asked to preach just a few minutes in light of the length of other parts of the service. There will be opportunities later in the week to consider the passion narrative we just heard—and so I will focus on the procession of the palms passage we heard earlier—that reading from Mark, chapter 11. And I must begin with one of my favourite sermons ever on this passage. It was a comically bad sermon. The preacher was, oddly, focused on the donkey. He went for more than 55 minutes, tracing every instance of donkeys in the whole of the Bible, I guess trying to piece together a grand theology of donkeys. And he, very predictably concluded that, in this passage, we *are* the donkey. Though I sympathize with his commitment to theology, I'm still not sure what he meant by that last part.

But the more I've considered this passage over the last week, the more I wonder if he wasn't too far off. Of course this passage is a grand picture of the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, entering Jerusalem in this faux royal procession. The crowds act in accordance with processional expectation—a reference back to 2 Kings 9 when Jehu was anointed king of Israel.¹ The crowds also speak more than they know: "*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*" It's doubtful that they realized Jesus Christ truly was the Davidic King, ready to restore the kingdom of Israel and sit upon the throne forever—not through military victory, mind you, but rather through his death on a cross just five days later.²

And that's the reality here. I don't think we're the donkey. We're the crowd: excited at the big new thing in town, but living in denial of reality, the real cost of what it means to follow Jesus. Now, there's no evidence that this is the same crowd who will, very shortly, shout 'Crucify him, crucify him.'³ But it wouldn't be surprising. Crowds are fickle. Crowds look out for their own interest. Human beings are fickle and look out for their own interest.

¹ See 2 Kgs 9:13.

² See the promise of God in 2 Sam 7:4-17.

³ See Mark 15:13. Cf. Luke 23:21.

But not Christ Jesus. He entered Jerusalem, knowing it would be to his gruesome death. And he went anyway—humbly, perhaps fearfully, knowing it would be costly. And praise God that he did. For in his sacrifice, captured so beautifully in that Philippians reading, he saved all who believe, even the fickle people in that fickle crowd, and even us.⁴

And so? Consider this day whether you will follow, not just in the royal processional, but all the way to the cross. Will you, as Mark noted just a few chapters earlier when Jesus taught the twelve: ‘deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him?’⁵ Will you stand firm in this conviction, being reminded each time we sing or say in the midst of our Eucharistic prayer: “Hosana in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosana in the highest,”⁶ that the cost is real, and it is also worth it?

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to follow you all the way to the end, that we might come to the joy of salvation found in your son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁴ See Phil 2:5-11.

⁵ Mark 8:34.

⁶ The Archbishops’ Council 2000, *Common Worship: Service and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 196.