

SERMON

Palm Sunday

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Learning to be the Church Again

Mark 11:1-11

Let me take you to a small rural congregation outside my hometown in South India. This village like many across India, is marked by religious fervour and caste practice, and Dalits, Untouchables like myself, are excluded and forced to live on the outskirts of the village. These Dalit communities are at the very heart of Christianity in India, living on the margins, neglected, excluded, and seen as religiously dirty.

On Palm Sunday, these Dalit Christians joyfully process into the village, shouting 'hosanna' into spaces from which they are excluded. Dalits, whether Hindu or Christian are not permitted to enter into the Hindu temples and holy spaces for fear that they will pollute and taint other worshippers as well as the deity, the God, itself. On Palm Sunday, poor Dalits dress up, decorate palm leaves and process, singing hosanna much like the crowd in Jerusalem during Jesus' time.

This Dalit Christian community, living under constant threat of violence and intimidation, proclaims the name of Jesus, and themselves as children of God. In joyous events of Palm Sunday, in their procession, the Dalit Christians bring Jesus with them into the places where the otherwise would not go. Their faith in Jesus emboldens them, Jesus embraced them and made God accessible to them. They know that in the village they are still despised and humiliated, and will face real retaliation, but in Jesus, their human dignity is restored – even if only for a moment.

In Mark's gospel Jesus' ministry is no longer private. Just before the Passover Jesus decides to enter Jerusalem, the heart of religious, economic and political power. Jerusalem was a colonised city. Many temple authorities were complicit in this occupation. People didn't have freedom. He enters with much fanfare, in the street, in the midst of people, apparently fulfilling a messianic prophecy (Zechariah 9:9). This procession along the traditional pilgrimage route is an explicitly political statement.

According to Mark Jesus had carefully coordinated this event, a 'street theatre'. Jesus is staging a counter demonstration. Mark contrasts the imagery of Jesus' entry as a non-military king riding on a borrowed donkey with Pilate riding a military stallion. Jesus, the son of David, who was coming into Jerusalem was not looking to defend the Davidic temple or rehabilitate it, rather disrupt it.

By choosing to ride a donkey Jesus explicitly ridicules the powers and principalities, their preoccupation with glory and domination. Contrary to the popular tagline, the 'triumphant entry', Jesus' march is a peaceful, unarmed, non-violent pilgrimage, with a clear message to unmask and resist the dehumanising powers.

By entering Jerusalem, an occupied city, Jesus becomes the site of protest, resistance and hope for the community. By leaving the comfort, safety and trappings of power, Jesus offers a fresh image of the anticipated messiah. People embraced Jesus, as he entered the streets. Because he embraced their destitution, desolation and hopelessness. He took their pain as his own. People found their voice. People shouted 'hosanna', because he was there with them. Because he was them. Jesus practices solidarity and justice.

This journey through Jerusalem inevitably leads to the cross. The son of David and the messiah, who is being acclaimed, is going to be carrying the cross on the same street, humiliated, with distrustful and demining glances directed towards him, perhaps by the same crowd. In the eyes of the crowd, Jesus was a messiah one day and a suspect another day. Eventually hung on the cross with his dignity taken away, stigmatised and abandoned, much like my Dalit sisters and brothers. That is the true identity of Jesus Christ. That's where we meet God. As we know the cruelty of cross is upended by resurrection.

Jesus through this street demonstration opens up a new way of experiencing life. In Jesus God was present in the world and the world was open to God. Jesus is not simply the presence of God among the marginalised, more than that Jesus represents a truly marginalised God. The heart of the Gospel is enacted in these brief moments. The Dalit Christian community I mentioned earlier continues to live it.

The pandemic has fundamentally changed our world and our communities. The church was no exception. Besides the immense loss, the pandemic has also exposed deep social destitution, systemic racism, stubborn economic inequalities and political populism. Across the world, either Christians have been part of it or abdicated their moral responsibility by vacating the public space.

The necessity couldn't be any higher to relocate, to un-domesticate the Gospel, as we embody Jesus in our lives, as disciples and apostles 'here and now'. The church needs to unmask the inequalities, both within and outside, through our embodied discipleship.

Let us listen to the voices of subversion in an otherwise well-tamed text, let us hold before our eyes Jesus as the impoverished messiah riding a donkey. When political ideologies and authoritarian regimes trample on vulnerable people, we cannot be spectators. When our bodies are colonised by dominant prescriptions, we cannot be silent. When racialised social views give us privilege and power, we cannot be complacent. When my skin colour and race determine whether I belong or not, we cannot normalise such a view.

When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, he challenged status-quo. Jesus embodied Peace and Justice, therefore for us, the church, it should not be an issue to be addressed and debated. It is the very identity of the church. If we don't have it in us and we cannot be the body of Christ. This is a moment of reckoning for us as Christians and as a church in this land.

Following on the footsteps of Jesus this Palm Sunday, we have an opportunity to learn to be the church again, be present in the brokenness of the world. The challenge for us as we seek to rethink our priorities, the symbolism of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem instructs us that we abandon messianic triumphalism and be utterly present in the abandoned lives in the streets. Let us remind ourselves that Jesus did not call his disciples to a tribal club. This journey is also an invitation for an individual inner spiritual renewal. We cannot slip back to a 'new normal', but we need to be born anew in Spirit, to be 'born again'. You and I as disciples of Jesus Christ are called to live like him, and love like him, inside out.

A desire for self-preservation will inevitably short circuit the redemptive power of God. When we make the lives of people redundant, we make Jesus redundant and ultimately God redundant. Unless we can locate Jesus' passion in the real life of people and our emotional lives, we will not be able to understand the meaning of incarnation nor the subversion of bodies that resurrection ultimately signifies.

Dear friends, carrying on a long biblical tradition, Jesus showed that salvation comes when ordinary people do God's will, like you and me, when we brave going out, taking our faith and our God with us. May God help us to follow this Jesus and raise a generation to be faithful to his calling. Hosanna.