



# *Palm Sunday*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 28 March 2021

### READINGS

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 31: 9-16; Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 14: 1-15

*“Lo, your king comes to you humble and seated  
on a donkey’s colt.” Matthew 21:5*

One of the themes which Palm Sunday lends itself to is the kingship of Jesus. The Feast of Christ the King, the other logical day on which we reflect on Jesus’ kingship, does this at a cosmological level – Christ is Lord of the Cosmos, whereas perhaps on Palm Sunday we get to explore some of the human aspects of Jesus’ kingship. We can begin by asking then: what kind of king was Jesus?

Besides focusing on the kingship of Jesus, represented in the “triumphal entry”, as the subtitle of the feast of Palm Sunday indicates, we also get a foretaste of the events of Easter weekend which is why traditionally we read part of the Passion narrative. So, in order to answer the question – what kind of king was Jesus? – I wish to focus on events preceding Jesus’ Passion, namely his arrest and some of the charges brought against him.

As Fr Moses mentioned a few weeks ago, according to the Synoptic tradition (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the cleansing of the temple serves as the catalyst for Jesus’ arrest. So we are prompted to ask what it was about this public act which gave the authorities licence, or at least motivation, to arrest Jesus. Again, in trying to answer the question – what kind of king was Jesus? – just for the purpose of exploring different hypotheses, we could begin by asking whether the ministry of Jesus was, in any way, political. As a sub-question, we could ask whether Jesus condoned violence to achieve the ends of his ministry. These might seem like quite strange questions, but the reason I am asking them is based on the contention that unless Jesus’ ministry was perceived, on some level, as posing a political threat, it is unlikely the authorities would have ever arrested him.

So Luke 22:38 indicates that Jesus’ disciples were in fact armed, as does Mark 14:47. Why then? For what purpose? We see some clues in the account of Jesus’ arrest. The Synoptics tell us that a “crowd” came to arrest Jesus but that the crowd was armed with “swords and clubs” (Mark 14:43) – in John we are told that a company of Roman soldiers and the temple police came to arrest Jesus (John 18:3) – and in the Synoptic tradition, those who came to arrest Jesus do so “as if he were a bandit” (Mark 14:48). Often, in English translations, this word is rendered thief or robber which, in fact, is misleading.

Reference to bandits and banditry is made throughout the Gospels. Apart from the above reference in Mark 14:48, we are told that Jesus was crucified between two bandits (Mark 15:27). Barabbas, the

prisoner released instead of Jesus, according to John, was a bandit (John 18:40). According to the Synoptics, Jesus accused the religious authorities ironically of making the temple a den of bandits (Mark 11:17). It is important then to understand something of what is now known as the phenomenon of social banditry which always arises in response to, and in reaction against, circumstances of political domination. There is an aspect therefore of banditry, or of the bandit's psyche, that is fundamentally political in nature. Now we are obviously not saying that Jesus was a bandit, but there is an aspect of the way in which he was publicly perceived, particularly by the authorities, which overlaps with this category. We can better understand this too by remembering that crucifixion, as a form of execution, was reserved for those guilty of sedition, i.e. for those who sought politically to oppose Rome.

So, we ask the question: why did Jesus die the death of a political dissident, the death of a bandit? We are now able to consider some of the charges against Jesus, and there seem to have been three which have historical grounding. Usually, we think of the main charge as his claim to have been the Son of God, which was supposedly blasphemous and punishable. There is a strong tradition though which suggests Jesus' own tendency was to defer or evade titular claims or claims to uniqueness of this sort. In addition, some scholars regard the charge of blasphemy as one retrospectively projected onto the Gospel narrative after controversies between early Christians and Jews arose as to the status of Jesus. Furthermore, as strange as it may sound, there is also evidence to suggest that a claim to be the Son of God, at least within Judaism, might not necessarily have been regarded as blasphemous. Certainly, if the Messiah was equal to being 'the Son of God' there are numerous examples of figures around the time of Jesus who laid claim to this title and were not charged with blasphemy. Perhaps we need to think of, or see, this supposed charge in a different light.

We could see the charge as relating to a claim either made by Jesus, or made by others about him, that he was a Messianic figure of some kind, but understand that Messiah was also a political designation, i.e. it was a claim to kingship. One stream of thought saw the Messiah coming in the mould of David, to vanquish the enemies of Israel, who happened to be the Romans at the time. The historicity of this charge is strengthened in part by the detail of Herod's sign which read, "The king of the Jews". In fact, Mark 15:26 tells us that this was not just a title or designation, but a charge brought against Jesus. The rationale behind this is explained in John 19:12 – "Everyone who makes himself king opposes Caesar."

Perhaps the most historically reliable of the charges appearing in the Gospels was Jesus' prophecy of the Jewish temple's destruction. Mark not only places this on the lips of Jesus (Mark 13:2) but also lists it as a charge brought against him by the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:58). The charge, and the prophecy, is also linked to that most important act which, as we have mentioned, led to Jesus' arrest – the cleansing of the temple. We can then begin to see how this prophetic act, coupled with Jesus' prophecy of the temple's destruction, would have been a provocation of the Jewish authorities.

The third less obvious charge which seems to be historical appears in Luke 23:2 and perhaps is also represented in Mark 12:13-17, namely that Jesus encouraged his followers, perhaps the populace, not to pay taxes to Caesar. This would have been viewed by both Jewish and Roman authorities as problematic and seditious, for the Jewish authorities were duty-bound, on pain of military retaliation, to pay tribute to Rome. Mark 12:13 in fact says that the question about the taxes was a pretext to publicly incriminate Jesus.

Though we have perhaps arrived at more questions than answers, hopefully the some of the details we have referred to will give us deeper insight into aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry. And as you contemplate these things may God's hand of blessing remain upon you. Amen.