

MARK 11:1-11
OF HOW MUCH IS JESUS KING?

Have you noticed the protocols of power? We've seen so many of them this week when the G20 leaders have been in London. No-one is allowed to touch Queen; you only shake hands if she offers and you certainly do not put your arm round her; there was a great fuss a few years ago when the Australian Prime Minister did just that; Mrs Obama did the same this week, but she got away with it! Michelle Obama herself visited a primary school and got down on her knees to talk to the children, which was great, but did you see the Secret Service men on the stage watching every move in the crowd? Mr Obama is the most-guarded US President ever. There were certain times and occasions when they were free to speak to the heads of state, but there were other times when the journalists were only allowed to watch, not speak! How many Presidents, Prime Ministers, or Kings, ever open a door? Do they know that doors actually need someone to open and close them because they never do it for themselves. Someone once quipped that the Queen must think the whole world smells of paint because everywhere she goes, places have been newly painted just for her visit. These are some of the protocols of power and high office.

Sometimes other things happen with people. I came across this quote a while back: "Geo Bush has power, Mother Teresa had authority." There are two different influences at work in that quote: first of all, George Bush was the most powerful man in the world, in some respects; he commanded the most powerful army on the planet, he was in charge of the most important economy, the wealthiest nation; because he was president of USA he had this kind of power right across the world. But, he was also one of the most mocked leaders ever to walk the world stage; the cartoon images portrayed him as a donkey, his verbal slips and mispronunciations are repeated over and over again on television. Secondly, and on the other hand, Mother Teresa never held an important office anywhere in world; she was *only* a nun working in the slums of Calcutta, India, serving the poor of her world, giving herself to serve God in that place; yet she had an impact and influence on the world that has lasted long after she herself has died. Power and authority are sometimes two very different things.

Where does Jesus fit into this picture? Palm Sunday captures something of a dilemma: Jesus is the king, on one hand; but on other hand, what kind of king? This is something of the dilemma that people in Jerusalem faced as the events of Holy Week unfolded: they had welcomed Jesus as king, with their excited, exuberant display of affection, but things changed; He was arrested, put on trial – what now for their relationship to this King? Then He was crucified, just like a common criminal – how now is He a King? Surely not! It's all gone, it has all been a lie! Next Sunday we celebrate Easter, with the declaration that Jesus is alive, risen, and all over again people declare that Jesus is King and Lord of everything! How the mood changes through Easter week! How people's attitudes change! Did some who cheered Him on Palm Sunday, call 'crucify Him' on Friday? We have no way of knowing; probably not, but it is just possible. That dilemma starts with Palm Sunday!

They were coming towards Jerusalem from the East. The Mount of Olives is high above the city, and you can see the whole city from there; they came to the villages of Bethphage and Bethany and either Jesus had arranged for the donkey to be there, or knew it was there and the owner would give it, so He sent two disciples out to get the donkey for Him to ride. As He sat on the donkey, the people began to put their coats on the ground, some even put them on the donkey as a rough saddle. Then branches from the trees were cut and waved and put on the ground and the whole crowd is full of joy and excitement. This is enough in itself to say that some important

dignitary is coming to visit. This is their way of welcoming a VIP as we've said already. I'm not sure how much crowd would recognise Jesus as their King and Messiah, but surely they saw something of it to welcome Him in the way they did.

There's more than that: some 450-500 years before Zechariah had said "*Rejoice greatly...*" (*Zech 9:9*) Kings are not always valued for their personal qualities, very unusually are kings valued for their gentleness and humility, or even for their righteousness; despite what Gordon Brown said a couple of months ago about saving the world, this is not usually the way people see their kings and leaders. Kings are more often valued for their power, strength and might, and are more often to be seen riding a war-horse than a donkey, more often in a Rolls Royce than a Mini, more often riding a tank than a bike! Yet Zechariah, inspired by God, promises that their King will come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey, He will be righteous, He will bring salvation to the world. That promise was made and had stood for nearly 500 years and nothing had happened; lots of leaders had come, but they were all men of war, who had tried to set Israel free by power, might, and their army.

It seems to me a quite deliberate act by Jesus to rise into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. This didn't happen by accident, but He surely meant it! "*Go to...*" (*11:2f*) "*Many people...*" (*11:8*) and Jesus rode into the city riding on a donkey. In doing so, He is saying to the city, to the crowd, to the people, to anyone watching 'I am your King'. "remember Zech's promise? – here it is fulfilled! Remember God's promise to you? – here it is completed!" This is all reinforced by the shouts of the crowd quoting Psalm 118: "*Hosanna; Blessed is...*" (*11:9*) Jesus comes into the city as God's chosen King for Israel, as the One who completes the old promise, the One whom people greet as their king. Jesus is saying 'I am that King! I am that Saviour!' As I said, by Friday that claim looked hollow: the only crown Jesus ever wore was a crown of thorns, put together as a joke by the soldiers to poke fun at Jesus' claims; His friends saw Him crucified and must have thought that their hopes and dreams had come to an end. Yet, Easter Sunday is God declaring Jesus to be His Son, to be Saviour and Lord, Saviour for whole world and Lord and King of everything.

One of earliest Christian confessions of faith was to say "Jesus is Lord!" Whenever people profess their faith in public in Church, we are still asked to say that "Jesus is Lord" though there are some other bits that go with it now! Jesus is Lord! It seems quite simple, yet for these early Christians it was enormously controversial. In the first century world they lived in, Caesar was Lord and King; to be a good citizen of Rome, or a soldier in the Roman army, you had to swear allegiance to Caesar as Lord; Christians couldn't do both; they couldn't swear allegiance to both Caesar and Jesus, they had to choose one or the other; Christians who chose allegiance to Jesus usually ended up in prison or fighting the gladiators or the lions in the Coliseum.

It is a hard thing to do in our culture to make any kind of public declaration of allegiance. Political parties struggle for membership, partly because people not join groups like that so much anymore, but partly because people are not so ready to make that kind of public declaration of allegiance. Churches struggle to persuade people to become members of their churches; there is a whole lot of people who attend Church regularly and faithfully, but never make any kind of public profession by becoming a member of the Church. One of the values of going through the process of professing faith and making membership promises, is that sense of public declaration of allegiance, not so much to the Church, but to Jesus as Lord; 'we commit ourselves to serve Jesus as our Lord; He is Lord and we will be His people!' Christians have always made that kind of declaration and always will.

Paul says to the Christians in Philippi: "*Whatever happens...*" (1:27) It seems to me that this is what it means to call Jesus 'Lord'. For Christians to call Jesus Lord is not just a service or ceremony to go through to join a Church; for Christians to call Jesus Lord is all about the way we live our lives. Paul tells us that we should conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of Jesus. Look at Jesus: what does He stand for? How did He live His life? What did He teach? Then our lives are to match up to that. This is not just about coming to Church; this is about way we live every day and in everyday situations: it is about work, family, relationships, the way we use our time; in every aspect of life, we are to conduct ourselves in a manner that befits Jesus, that is in tune with Him, with His way, His teaching, His example.

Paul gives some examples of what it means to live in a way worthy of Jesus: "*Stand firm...*" (1:27) Jesus persevered in faith; Easter is all about Jesus standing firm in His faith, despite what other people said to Him or about Him; we are to be the same.

"*Make my...*" (2:2) There is to be a spirit of unity and harmony about the Church, to be a people who have that kind of unity about them, that they stand together in Christ, sharing faith, sharing love, sharing an allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

"*Do nothing...*" (2:3f) That unity is possible only as we live together in a humble spirit, a spirit that looks to see others' needs met before our own, serving others, in exactly the way Jesus loved and served, was humble and gentle. Our life, the way we live, has to be worthy of Jesus; we can make a display of our allegiance to Him by our public profession, and then we have to live in a manner worthy of Him. That is much more important, but it is also much harder.

This is what it means to have Jesus as King. Some people marched into Jerusalem with Jesus on Palm Sunday and by their songs and palm branches and coats, they said 'Jesus is our King.' By our worship today and in a moment in our last hymn, we will say 'Jesus is our King; we are on His side.' Alongside that, for the rest of today, and tomorrow, and the rest of the week, we have to try to live our lives in a manner worthy of Jesus. Jesus is King of what? Our lives? Our purses and wallets? Our diaries? Our relationships and the way we relate to other people? Our work and the way we go about our work?

Jesus rode into the city on a donkey: this was an action designed to declare that He is King, but not a king of power, strength, war-horses and armies; He is a king who loves what is right; a king who comes to save; a king who is gentle, but nonetheless a King! He is a King who has authority to shape us, to shape the way we think, our attitudes, who has authority to shape the way we behave, the kind of people that we are, who has authority to shape what we do with our lives; this is what it means to say Jesus is our King! But of how much is Jesus King? Of all of this? Or bits? Or none?