

The Lord has need... Palm Sunday

Psalm 119:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 2:1-11

What might Jesus' shopping list at the beginning of Holy Week have looked like?

- One donkey, one foal.
- Coats and cloaks for strewing
- Palm branches for waving.
- Hard hats and plasters or bandages (just in case) after overturning tables in Temple
- Fruit for eating (the fig tree is barren)
- Throat and cough syrup (too much talking and teaching)
- Money (coins with Caesar's likeness – visual aid)
- Paracetamol (for headache caused by constant questioning and quibbling from Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees, which failing, ear plugs)
- Bible (check quotes and references)
- Sunscreen (for sitting on the Mount of Olives)
- House gifts for Simon the Leper, and possibly Lazarus, Martha and Mary.
- Cleaning cloth (to wipe up residue of pure nard after anointing, it's sticky)
- A room for supper
- A bowl and water, for foot washing, and a towel
- Bread
- Wine
- Hymnbook for psalm singing. (Not Crimond again)
- Warm sleepwear for a night in the Garden, it's Jerusalem but it still gets cold.

- Oh, and don't forget the donkey and the foal, really need them for Sunday.

Well, who knows. At the beginning of Jesus' last week, a little bit of imagination and Bible knowledge begins to make us aware of something that was true throughout Jesus' ministry. He had needs. Like any one of us, like any one of His followers, Jesus had needs for comfort, food, warmth, clothing, rest, drink, quiet time, being treated, and tender, loving care.

The phrase, 'The Lord has need...' may be associated with Jesus' request for a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, but it points to a bigger question, what were the things that the Lord required then, and now.

Some scholars wonder if the phrase, 'The Lord has need' was in fact some kind of pre-arranged code, to reassure the owner of the animals that these were not some random individuals purloining two important beasts of burden. Others note that no palm branches are mentioned in Matthew's gospel, just branches in general.

Other scholars also paint the intriguing picture of, "Two processions (entering) Jerusalem on that Spring Day. One from the east, largely composed of Galilean peasants, following a certain Jesus of Nazareth riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west approached the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover where nearly quarter of a million pilgrims crowd into Jerusalem. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God. Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of Empire. The two diametrically opposed processions embodying the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.ⁱ

Be that as it may, Jesus appears to know that by entering Jerusalem He begins the final chapter of His life. "It will end here, not with fanfare and enthronement but with torture and disgrace."ⁱⁱ

There's always a danger that we treat Palm Sunday as some kind of Festival parade, with enough oomph in the cheering and chanting to project us from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without taking into consideration anything of the challenges and awfulness of the events that lie between.

The overturned tables in the Temple; the hard teaching that challenged religious orthodoxies; the talk about death; the washing of feet; the broken bread and spilled wine; the betrayal and desertion and conviction and crucifixion.

But on Palm Sunday, this strangely lonesome figure on a donkey, calm, outwardly at least, and saying not a recorded word as He rode down that precipitous track from the Mount of Olives and into the city. This strange carpenter shepherd; this servant king. Everyone else in uproar: the cheering crowd, the watching city in turmoil, asking the question, "Who is this?" But from the central character, riding on the donkey, not a word. Just needs. 'The Lord has need...'

What did Jesus need on that day, in that coming week? For people to listen to Him and understand Him? For people to remember what He said and what He did for the benefit of future generations? For people to wake up to the reality that the love of God brought responsibilities as well as privileges? For people to know that the God they had heard about in synagogue and Temple, was serious, deadly serious, about involvement with the world and a steely determination to reveal the extent of love and the defeat of death, however terrible the cost of this would be?

'The Lord has need...' not only from the people of His time on that first Palm Sunday. 'The Lord has need' from people like us today. In one of His Temple teachings when challenged to say which was the greatest commandment, Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind", and, "You shall love your neighbour as

yourself." Just as Jesus showed total commitment to humanity, so He looks, in return, for the same from us. Jesus need from us is commitment, compassion, maybe even some kind of sacrifice so that we can demonstrate not just the 'head and heart and soul' commitment to God, but the equally challenging commitment to do something about what we believe so that a difference is made.

Our needy Saviour needs us.

On that first Palm Sunday, I like to imagine the silent Saviour riding on the borrowed donkey, listening to what was being said and sung and shouted, but watching, and noticing, and looking. As He rode by, imagine Him looking into the eyes of individuals in the crowd. Imagine Jesus looking right at them, not only into their eyes, but into their souls. "I'm going to need you," He thinks. "I'm going to need you after the noise of Palm Sunday, and the drama of this Holy Week, and the silence of cross and tomb, and the stillness of the resurrection garden. I'm going to need you to remember, and to talk about what you remember, and then to show to a suspicious and indifferent world that what you remember has made a difference to you and the way you choose to live your life."

Do you think it might be any different today. He might not come into Church, riding on a donkey, but He might still slip in quietly, into that empty blue chair in front of you, behind you, beside you. And you are suddenly aware of Him looking at you. Those same searching eyes, wondering what you might do, or what you might be, for Him, today.

'The Lord has need...' for justice in our world for the vulnerable and the powerless. 'The Lord has need...' for friendly words and actions towards lonely and isolated people. 'The Lord has need...' for people in every walk of life to be honest, and compassionate and generous. 'The Lord has need...' for people to teach and share their faith, and when the words don't come, to show it in

their actions. 'The Lord has need...' for people who can see something that needs to be done to help others, or to make a difference to others, and volunteer to do it, or get on with it quietly without waiting to be asked. 'The Lord has need...' for people to worship, and make music, and things of beauty to be enjoyed and appreciated.

'The Lord has need...' It is maybe not Jesus' shopping list for Palm Sunday and Holy Week. But it might be a need, a wish list, for what ordinary women and men might say, might do, might be in our equally needy world today. What do you think it might be that the Lord needs from you, this week?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, pps 2-3

ⁱⁱ Stephen Boyd, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 2*, p140