

It was already late

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

The Gospel-writer Mark's telling of the story of Palm Sunday is a masterpiece of brevity and understatement, leaving a host of questions both unasked and unanswered. We are meant to wrestle with what is written, and what is implied, with guidance from those trained to help with those questions.

How did Jesus know his disciples would find a colt upon which He would ride into the city? In what seems clearly a prearranged action, were Jesus and the disciples using a password to alert the owner of the colt, the donkey, that they would need the animal for a few hours, and weren't simply taking it for a joy-ride around Jerusalem?

Was there a parallel symbolism for the Jesus Palm Sunday Procession coming in from the east of Jerusalem when at more or less the same time Pontius Pilate would be arriving at the western side, from the Mediterranean coastal city Caesarea Maritima, with Roman troops and cavalry to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Antonia fortress next to the Temple and its courts. Built by Herod the Great in honour of his patron, Mark Antony, it's function was to protect the Temple, but also act as a garrison for Roman troops. A Roman symbol of economic and political domination through military power and the threat of its use.

Were Jesus and His disciples recalling an Old Testament prophecy that spoke of a future king riding into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey, bringing peace to the nation, and peace to the world? What kind of King could do this?

Jerusalem itself, preparing for the central Jewish feast of Passover which marked the moment when the Angel of God passed over the children of Israel, enslaved in Egypt, leaving them alive

whilst striking down their Egyptian overlords in one of the great legends of Jewish identity. Estimates of the city's population in the C1st AD was around 40,000. But at Passover as many as two hundred to three hundred thousand Jewish pilgrims flooded the city. Fulfilling the promise of the exile, 'Next year, Jerusalem', and worshipping in the Temple, the most sacred space for the Jews, where once, in the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, with the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written, had been stored.

That pivotal cry, "Hosanna!" It means, 'God save!' Save this humble King? Or save the people who were following Him? Or save the nation of Israel, or its Roman occupiers? Or save the whole world. "Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord!" What are we to do with a God Who is on the move, then and now? Do we see Him? Do we believe in Him?

Then after the excitement of the crowds and the palm waving and cloak strewing, and donkey, and secret codes, and thousands already in the city, and tensions with the Romans arriving in armed might on the other side of Jerusalem, what happens next when Jesus finally arrived, going in through one of the eastern gates?

"And 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."

Nothing happens. Beyond going to the Temple, looking around at everything (what did He see, what was He looking for?) nothing happens. We are set up for some kind of Messianic intervention, which we know comes on the Monday when He overturns the tables of the moneychangers. But on Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters the Temple, nothing happens. He goes back to Martha and Mary and Lazarus at Bethany, with His Twelve Disciples. We are told, "It was already late."

Late for what? It was certainly late in the day, literally. The dark would have begun to fall over the crenelated walls around the Temple and city, and the courts would have been emptying of people. Late for the hushed murmurings of prayers. Late for the muffled noises and shouts from the garrison troops as they settled down in the Antonia Fortress. Late for the journey home through darkening narrow streets, and the City walls with its gates getting ready to close for the night. Late as they crossed the deep Valley of Kidron outwith the walls, passed Gethsemane. Late on the road up the Mount of Olives, the Jericho Road, that would take them south to Bethany. Late for a meal with Martha, Mary and Lazarus. There were all sorts of literal lateness.

But late in other ways too. It was already late. Late in Jesus' three-year ministry, with most of the teaching and healing and miracles and eating and drinking done. Late for Jesus reaching out to any more blind beggars, or lonely women at wells, or sick children needing held, or people with poor mental health needing included, or walking on water, or feeding thousands. It was already late. But was it too late? It was *already* late, but it doesn't say it was *too* late. There was still time for that whole week, we call Holy, with its tensions and arguments, with its teaching and observations, with its Last Supper and betrayals, with its arrest and beating and humiliating and crucifying and dying and burying. What was going through the mind of Jesus as it was already late? It was already late, but it was not too late.

As we stand with Jesus in the darkening hours of His life, and literally the darkening hours of that first Palm Sunday, after whatever our last few days have been, happy or sad, bright or dark, we too might wonder if it is too late for us. Too late to get that revision done properly for exams. Too late to chase after a promotion. Too late to fix my finances. Too late to patch up a quarrel that's been going on too long. Too late to sort the garden out. Too late to look for another job. Too late to find love. Too late to say the words we really want to say to the people we love as they begin

to fade from our lives for whatever reason. Too late to say, "I love you." It is already late, but it might not be too late.

Too late for political manifestos to be written with promises that will be kept. Too late to turn the country, and the world, around. Too late to persuade Russian and China not to block the ceasefire in Gaza. Too late for Israelis and Palestinians, Russians and Ukrainians to commit to peace. Too late for the starving people of Sudan and South Sudan. It is already late, but it might not be too late.

Is it too late for the Church? We live in a world where our culture has been devastated by radical individualism, and where Covid and lockdown turned so many people inwards and out of the habit of church-going. But let's not pretend this is a phenomenon of the last five years. Some would argue it's been going on for the last 50 years. And it wasn't particularly comforting when talking about the 19th century churchman Thomas Chalmers to discover that he'd identified serious failings in the church in 1817. In his parish in St George's Tron, Glasgow, of over 10,000 people, only 1 in 67 attended church. The latest round of Presbytery Mission Planning, still incomplete in our area, has led to anger, disappointment, even fear as to what the future is going to be. Are we finished, for it is already late, or is there somewhere, somehow, just a glimmer of hope that as we have reinvented ourselves in the past, through union, through bold and imaginative decisions in this congregation, we are being called, with Jesus, to do the same, and to keep the light on? It might not be easy, it is already late, but I firmly believe that it is *not* too late.

As I imagine standing near Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, as the dusk deepened and night fell, these thoughts of lateness are in my mind, for my life, for the Church, for the country and for the world. I invite you to ponder them in your own lives, not with despondency, but with a 'what now,

what next' attitude. Is the lateness a done-deal, or a challenge, or an opportunity? Do we have the kind of 'can-do' mentality that will move us on from the lateness, and into the 'now-ness'?

Our Sunday Club leaders decorated the Easter tree a couple of days ago. Hundreds of people have already seen it. So many of our events in Church already draw people into our welcome and our practical work. So many of you tell people about what we do and why we do it, and volunteer your time, talent and money to who we are, and what we are, and why we are.

It was already late, but from that Palm Sunday evening, there was an empty tomb, and a garden, and an upper room. And a risen Jesus.

It is never too late for resurrection.

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

Amen