

Views from the Pews - The symbol and the reality

The context for appreciating today's passage is set by the events of the previous day (John 12:1-11). Jesus had come to Bethany, the home of his friends Mary and Martha, and of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. A great crowd of people who had come to the Passover feast in Jerusalem heard that Jesus was from Bethany, a village only two miles outside the city. They came to Bethany in droves, not only to see Jesus, but also, filled with curiosity, to gawp at Lazarus (v.9).

Next day, the crowd heard that Jesus was indeed coming to Jerusalem, despite the hostility and threats of the Pharisees. The solid evidence of Jesus' power over death provided by Lazarus inspired the crowd to conclude that here indeed was the long-awaited King of Israel, 'he who comes in the name of the Lord'. So they came to meet him with royal acclamations and waving palm branches. Instead, Jesus humbly mounted a young donkey, the very opposite symbol to that of royal dignity.

Such a deliberate and unexpected action must have puzzled everyone. Among the joyful crowd there might have been some Jews who recalled the prediction of Zechariah 9, that 'your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt', but pretty much everyone else expected a king to ride a war-horse. Perhaps that is why the Greeks, familiar with royal parades, asked Philip for a 'please explain'. Philip was from Bethsaida, 133 km north of Jerusalem, and that much closer to Hellenistic influence.

Jesus realised that his imminent sacrifice was going to be misunderstood by everyone, including his own disciples. Facing what must have looked like complete failure of his mission, no wonder he dug deep for reassurance from his Father:

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. (v. 27).

God's voice from heaven was 'for your sake, not mine', although the crowd heard only thunder. But, Jesus continued,

Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' (v 31-32).

Still no-one understood. Only centuries of meditation suggests a link between the symbol and the reality of God's compassion lifted up through the ages: Moses' serpent on a pole, and Christ on his cross.

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