

Palm Sunday 2021

Zechariah 9:9-14; Mk.11:1-11

I suspect many of you will not yet have seen April's *Outlook*, but when you do, one of the treats awaiting you is a piece by Brian Hibberd, introducing the work of one of his favourite authors, Terry Pratchett. Pratchett is an enthusiasm Brian and I share. Again and again, usually in a very funny way, he uses his fantasy Disc-world of giant turtles, small gods, dwarves, werewolves and vampires to say striking things about our own. There are books about high finance, the drug trade, nationalism, religion, the media, and – a recurring theme – monarchy, and how we're governed.

I think it's fair to say Pratchett's not a great fan of monarchy. At any rate, one of the greatest heroes of the Disc-world is emphatically not. Finding himself, against his better instincts, a Duke, Sir Samuel Vimes, or plain Sam as he would prefer, is deeply unconvinced by the whole idea of royalty. Perhaps no surprise, as his ancestor Stoneface Vimes bears a striking resemblance to our own Oliver Cromwell, and like the Lord Protector had also once despatched an overweening king. Still, Sam reflects, you can never really get rid of monarchy. Kings, he says, are like dandelions. No matter how many heads you chop off, they keep springing up everywhere. It is as if even the cleverest people have a blank space inside their heads (where some more brains should be) where instead it's written: 'kings. What a good idea.' Whoever designed human beings, thinks Sam, left them with one serious design flaw: a recurring tendency to bend at the knee.

Well, we can debate another time the relative merits of royalty and republics, Roundheads and Cavaliers. On this insight, however, Vimes was absolutely spot on. Whoever designed human beings gave them a recurring tendency to bend at the knee. Now, I'm not sure about Sam Vimes, but Terry Pratchett was definitely an atheist. For him, the idea of humans being designed a particular way was just a figure of speech; he didn't *really* think anyone had designed humans beings at all – we just *are*, and that's that. The Gospel says different. It says: no, no, you really were *made* this way. This really is *meant to be*. You truly were created with this impulse to bend the knee: to give total, unreserved, unqualified allegiance to something greater than yourself. To really get being human right, says the Gospel, involves bending your knee. Indeed not just the knee, but the whole life, the heart, bending to that which supremely deserves it. For believers, that's what being human really is.

Which is of course very dangerous. We see all around us the consequences of people bending the knee to that which *doesn't* supremely deserve it: to the Fuhrer, or the nation, or to drugs or money or ambition. False gods wreck lives. And yet, *not* having gods is equally bad news: lives that just drift, with no one over-riding love, no vision, no purpose, no allegiance, seem in the end rather pointless. This need we have for allegiance, for worship, is powerful. Point it in the wrong direction, and you crash. Choke it, and you waste away. The only solution is to put it in the right place, where it belongs, where it was made for. St. Augustine once put it brilliantly. O God, he said, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

The central claim of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ is that place, that person, before whom every knee was meant to bow, and one day will bow. We were made for this man. We were made to be bound to Him, to own Him as our King. To make everything about us, speak of our loyalty to Him, our love for Him. This, incidentally, is what the word 'faith' really means. It does not mean agreeing with every line of the Creed, though that may come: it is instead about pledging allegiance. And letting that allegiance shape everything about you. That's why when people say 'Oh I wish had your faith', the answer should really be, well, what's stopping you? Bend the knee. Do your duty. The rest of it – the Creed, understanding, spiritual certainty – might follow. They might not. But the one thing needful is that you have bent the knee, and given your oath.

And when you have, what does that look like? What difference does allegiance to Christ actually make to daily life? Well, it will mean prayer and worship, of course it will: consciously, daily, seeking to renew and deepen the bond between you and your King. Asking for his strength and guidance as you do his will. Prayer and worship will be at the heart of your daily life. *But* it goes far beyond that. Through the prayer, your life is turned to the King's business: and you know what that is, for you have seen him. You have seen Jesus of Nazareth, and you know what he was about: proclaiming the good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, healing the sick and the lame, setting prisoners free. If you bear true allegiance, that's what your life will look like too. It'll be about compassion and justice and mercy, and these things not just as attitudes but actions.

That's why things like the Malawi project, and the Food Bank, or caring for the bereaved, are not optional extras to being Christian – they're of the essence. They're what his Kingship, and our loyalty, looks like. It's also why something like, say, the Government's new rules about asylum should be right at the top of our collective mind. If they make it harder for people fleeing torture to find safety and new life here – perhaps they will not, but if they do – then bearing allegiance to King Jesus means opposing them with passion. Caring about those rules, making it our business to welcome the broken and the persecuted, is a test of our spiritual allegiance. Because that allegiance is not some private, interior thing, in a special religious compartment of life. It flows into everything. Into your politics, your money, your sexuality, the lot – or it is no allegiance at all.

Which is why Palm Sunday was followed so quickly by Good Friday. The Romans and the High Priests knew straight away that Palm Sunday was politics. You ride a colt into Jerusalem like Zechariah said, and you are claiming to be King. You let people wave palm branches around and shout 'Hosanna', and you are letting them acclaim you King. You might as well put the crown on your head. Let nobody ever tell you that Jesus was modest. The claims he made for himself were *spectacular*. More, indeed, than any mere king could make. Let me take charge of the Temple, which is *my* house. Let *me* tell you what Moses should have said. I forgive you your sins. / / I and the Father are *one*. The next time someone tells you that they think Jesus was a great teacher and a wonderful example, but surely just an ordinary man, remember what he taught! If he was just an ordinary man, he was not great or wonderful: he was mad, or worse. He says He's the King. The one in whom alone our hearts were made to find their rest. What crazy arrogance – unless, of course, it's true.

Near the end now, don't panic. But a little aside ... Think of that colt he rides on. A young colt, never ridden before, ridden now by a stranger, through a crowd of singing, dancing, cheering people, people pressing around it, surging down the road. All is noise and movement and energy. And that colt just walks, steadily, evenly, into Jerusalem. Never ridden before. Now, experts may want to dispute, but I gather this is not usual colt-like behaviour. It would panic, it would buck, it would throw, any other rider. But not *this* one. Not the one for whom all things were made. Not the one whom even the animals, in their own humble way, recognise as their King, and in whom they find their rest. Palm Sunday is a story of the quiet, awesome, majesty of Jesus: his natural authority recognised by beast and crowd. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

And this authority is so supreme, so majestic, that it does not need the usual apparatus of power. When Pilate rode into Jerusalem, around the same time probably, he came with legions, standards, war-horses and swords. The idea was to impress, to overwhelm, to intimidate. Step out of line, the Empire says, and we will crush you. Look how big and strong we are, and tremble. Jesus, by contrast, comes armed with precisely nothing. He does not try to impress, let alone intimidate. His authority is so far beyond Pilate's, so effortlessly and infinitely superior to anything Rome or Caiaphas could come up with, that He does not need to *compete* with them. He will not *fight* his way into Jerusalem. His kingship will be established through utterly different means.

And maybe that accounts for the very curious ending of the Gospel reading. *He entered Jerusalem, looked around, and because it was already late, he went back out to Bethany with the twelve.* I suspect if we'd been in the crowd shouting Hosanna that day, waving our branches, we'd now be bewildered. What's Jesus doing? We've had the triumphal entry, the King is here: surely now is the time, at last, to do some smiting! To send the Romans packing, to bring in the Kingdom? The Revolution is meant to be starting now, Jesus - *right now*, look, our swords are ready! Lord? Lord? Where's he gone? Did anyone see where he went?

And maybe what's happening is that Jesus is saying, just pause. You've acclaimed me King, and you're right. I am the one you've been waiting for. I am everything you've hoped for. But you don't, as yet, have a clue. You don't understand what *my* Kingship looks like, what real Kingship looks like. You're so used to fake kings, bad kings, that you don't know the genuine article. You will. You'll know it on Thursday, when I break bread and offer wine, when I kneel down to wash your feet. You'll know it on Friday, when they crown me and lift me up high. And you'll know it next Sunday, when everything changes, and a new world is born. But not yet. You've got to go through this week first, through these mysteries and come out the other side. Then you'll know. Then you'll rejoice. But for now: watch this.

And as for them, so for us. Of course, we've heard the Gospel before, of course we know what's coming. But it is so strange, so mysterious, that we need to watch this: to slow down, watch, and learn again. We need to keep Holy Week. To live through Thursday and Friday, before we shout for joy next Sunday. To learn once again what kind of King we have, and knowing that, to offer him once again the bended knee. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.