

What you see is only a hint at what you get!

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 ESV)

We know – and learn quickly if we don't – that communication is more than just the words we say. We are more than just syllables in the wind. The package that is us – ourselves, our clothes, our credentials also communicate. We're conscious when meeting someone for the first time that you never get a second chance at a first impression. Generally we want to make a good impression – so that the communication, the relationship goes favourably and people see us in the way we wish to be seen.

The prevalence of social media means that more people can see more about us and nothing seems to be forgotten and so a composite picture of us emerges that blurs public and private, social and personal – issues previously only the domain of the rich and famous – but today everyone can be a celebrity.

Concomitant with this is the rise also in our awareness of spin, of massaging the image, of working the angles of perception. We've always known to watch if actions match words but now we have semiotics – an entire academic discipline to help us make meaning from all sorts of signals and signs.

So on this Palm Sunday as we enter Holy Week, I wonder out loud what are we to make of Jesus organising his transportation into Jerusalem? We concentrate of course on the event – the triumphal entrance – the crowd, the greenery, the shouts, even the reaction of the opponents. We comment on the mode of transport – it's functional – yet more than incidental – for we see it as a sign usually of Jesus' humility.

We generally don't have at the fore that Jesus organised and orchestrated it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke devote details on the two disciples going and finding – being challenged as they untied the animals – and the rather enigmatic line 'the Lord has need'. John records that Jesus found a young donkey. The disciples are not really in on what is happening – they don't understand it until later – but when they do with the light of an empty tomb to help them see, they find the fulfilment of more and more Old Testament passages 'lighting up' with new meaning – so Zechariah comes into focus. In fact the last chapters almost seem to be a type of script for this coming week.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9 ESV)

So here's my question. How can we defend Jesus from the charge that he was a canny political operator who came unstuck? We're astute about human nature to know that sitting on a donkey doesn't guarantee humility. True humility, someone might challenge us, is being incognito, because any crowd and adulation will always swell your head.

Take any snap shot of Jesus and one gets a facet – a snippet – part of the whole. According to John, just prior to this entrance – and a big reason for the crowd's adulation was that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Not a resuscitation when the body was still warm. No, Lazarus was dead alright – on the nose – and yet Jesus could break death's hold. However the puzzle remains that Jesus deliberately waited and did not go and help when the news first came to him. That gets quickly forgotten in the joy of unwrapping what used to be corpse by a crowd who now sensed a force greater than whatever the Romans could do to them. But the waiting still happened ...

Often in church, like in the theatre, we willingly suspend our disbelief – yes, of course they're actors, it's not real – and our knowledge, if we know the play, what happens next, we suspend and concentrate on the moment. In church our senses challenge our faith – words, water, bread and wine are ... just that – vehicles for whatever you want them to be or nothing – to which we suspend our disbelief and reply, 'Yes Lord, I believe' or 'My Lord and my God' or something

similar. Similarly we often suspend our knowledge of later events and live in the moment of the Gospel scene but we're only here because we know what happened next.

Ultimately we can't defend Jesus from any charge because the world and ourselves are using different information. The world goes up to Jesus' death on the cross. We go there – it is significant after all. But we also go beyond to an empty tomb and Jesus' continuing presence with his people. For the world this is a history lesson about Jesus and about what his followers said about him. For Christians, this is our lives – meaning, purpose, past, and future all in focus because of the relationship with this Jesus. The charge of canny political operator who came unstuck remains but who wants to meet one? Really? So instead we proclaim, present the Jesus we know – the donkey riding Jesus, the dead Jesus, the risen Jesus, the present Jesus – as God among us, Immanuel. And when the world scratches its head we say – or sing – something like:

... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11 ESV)

The Jesus we want them to meet is not like us with our wish to be seen in certain ways, our dressing for the occasion, our desire to be appreciated but is someone who has lived his life on Earth from the perspective of us, doing what is in our best interests no matter what it cost him.

The defeat of the power of sin, death, and the demonic – our living of this new life with confidence and joy – was what drove Jesus to mysteriously – he defies our physics, our biology, our sense of what should happen – be who he was and to do what he did. What makes sense of the accounts of Jesus' life when you put them all together is that he is God and truly human who is not two persons but one and in this personal union of God and humanity, Jesus lays down his divine nature so that he is human and uses it only when it is for us and not for himself.

This is what we find most difficult, I think, in any contemplation of Jesus that he had power but did not use it. And when it was used, it was always with the goal of our salvation or our faith. The man who walked on water, rode a donkey, and also hung on a cross. Same man. Same God. And Jesus chooses to serve not be served, to empty himself for us, to be obedient when he should be obeyed, and to die when he should live – even a death on a cross – ie, cursed by God.

Why?

Two little words ... 'for you'.

The donkey is not a cynical political statement but yet another window that glimpses who Jesus is – gives us a peek into his identity and his purpose. He knows Zechariah and he is wanting us to make the connection that to see this person on a donkey is to see righteousness and salvation go by. He doesn't seem to have a reputation for being a genie – to help us as and when we want – but he is present to save.

The donkey gives way to a cross and here Jesus doesn't use his power for himself – and paradoxically when he looks most wretched and despised, he is most powerful and glorious in the paradox of dying and being dead. Why would he do this if he had any power at all?

The answer doesn't change ... 'for you'.

We enter Holy Week – not an unfamiliar journey for most of us – and the world looks on. It has always wanted Jesus on its own terms but he stubbornly refuses to comply. He will do his thing, his way, for us. And he still does – through words, water, bread and wine. And now his disciples better understand who he is – the mystery of his presence doesn't get in the way of people coming to the truth that one day everyone in Heaven, on Earth, and under the Earth will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

And in the meantime, his disciples seek to have the same mind as Christ – to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than themselves. Let each of us look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3,4 ESV) And that sort of living is the most dynamic and challenging of all.