

# A Paradoxical King

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2026 – Matthew 21:1-17)

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In my early twenties, as a new public servant, I participated in what was then the biggest march in Melbourne, as we protested cuts by Jeff Kennett. I joined the marches against the participation of Australia in the Iraq war twice, ten years apart. With the church I was pastoring at the time we marched in the very first reconciliation march in Melbourne, carrying our church banner and our 'sorry' sign. I walked silently down Sydney Road with thousands of others, protesting violence against women after the tragic death of Jill Meagher, just metres from the church I attended. At all of them, there were all kinds of people and children, people carried banners and sang and chanted as they walked. I never saw violence, at all of them we were trying to say something and send a message to our leaders in society, and I felt a sense of solidarity with people I would never meet again.

I know protest marches can be disruptive, but they are meant to be. In recent times people have been non-violently protesting what is happening in Gaza, and some of our folk have been attending protests about what is happening in Iran.

Our story today is about a protest march.

Jesus' friends are given an unusual task – to go and get a donkey and its foal or colt and bring it to him. They do and Jesus then rides it into the capital city. People greet him waving branches, throwing their clothes on the road like a red carpet and singing and shouting – Hosanna to the Son of David, shouting out in effect that Jesus is the long awaited for Messiah.

He rides on a donkey – a humble entrance it seems. However, lest we think that this is just a lovely parade through the streets of Jerusalem with a wishy-washy and ineffective leader we are mistaken and are misreading both the story and the context.

This is a protest march, this is a political act, this march will make a difference.

A number of theologians<sup>1</sup> believe that Jesus and his followers were making a stand. They were if you like, speaking truth to power. They suggest that on that day there was another march or procession going on. It was a march exhibiting power, Pilate was entering the city on the other side with all the show of force you would expect, with a great display of power and wealth, the kind of procession you would expect from a warrior king, from a Trump like leader.

This protest on the other side of the city in which Jesus was participating was making fun of such a march. No grand horses and carriages – a donkey. No fancy carpets and musical bands and soldiers marching in step – crowds grabbing branches and waving them, taking off their own clothes and tossing them on the ground. No show of force or grandeur – just a man being hailed as their liberator. The one who would liberate them from the oppression that Pilate and the occupying forces were exacting on the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Theologians like Marcus Borg

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This act of Jesus is deliberate. He knows what he is doing. As we learnt last week as he got closer to Jerusalem when he was at Bethany with his friends, Jesus knows there is danger as he enters the city. Jesus is setting himself up for a showdown with those who rule, with those who have oppressed the ordinary people, with those who exclude others and it is going to get messy.

And it does get messy, he has just been hailed as the Messiah for whom the people have prayed and waited, and before we know it, he is in the temple.

And at the temple he is enraged, it has been turned into a place where people are exploited, ripped off and in effect excluded from the house of God. He drives out those who are exploiting people and charging ridiculous prices for sacrifices, meaning the poor couldn't enter the temple to fulfill their religious obligations. He overturns the tables of the money changers who are getting rich as a result, who are ripping off the poor. We often refer to this as 'righteous anger' and it is, but make no mistake Jesus is angry!

Let me read to you a take on this event:

*Gentle, meek, mild, insipid.*

*What kind of Saviour is that?*

*Wishy-washy, ineffective.*

*Not someone we'd respect.*

*So why is it shocking to discover that Jesus is a man of passion,  
seized with righteous anger,  
wielding a whip,  
driving out those who drive out others,  
and make God's house exclusive?*

*Why should we be surprised that Jesus doesn't just speak out  
but takes action to ensure that all people,  
everywhere, have access to the love of God?  
And that, following this feisty man  
means that we too must be people of action?<sup>2</sup>*

Jesus is not meek and mild, he is passionate and enraged by the system around him that oppresses people, that is excluding people. He is showing there is another way and he is ushering it in, and he really believes in it and will stake his life on ushering in a way that is inclusive, fair and compassionate. Jesus his entire life has spoken truth to power, and he is not about to stop.

On your way in or perhaps on your way out you will have been given a small branch, a reminder of the branches that the people waved on that first Palm Sunday. It is not a

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<sup>2</sup> Poem by *Spill the Beans*, found in [Spring](#), a book by the Iona Community.

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cross, that will come later in the week. Take it and remember that you are a follower of this Jesus, a Jesus who:

- Stands up for those who are oppressed
- Will not remain unmoved by those who suffer
- Will not be silent when he sees injustice, particularly in the place of worship
- Will upset the status quo, be they politicians or religious folk who are excluding others
- Will act – turf out those who are making money out of others misfortune or economic circumstances
- Who will speak truth to power, make fun even, of those who try to 'lord it over' others
- Will pay the ultimate price for standing up for others and not shy away from the consequences.
- Will face the danger and not run the other way.

This is our 'King', this is the one who we say we follow. This is the man who will change the world by his actions and his life. Let our lives and our worship be such as this – let us protest all that is ugly, oppressive and exclusive. This is what it means to say Jesus is 'Lord of our life', this is what it means to be a follower of Jesus and sometimes it means getting political. We follow a 'servant' king, one who does all he can to ensure others live with justice and peace.

As you go into Holy Week ponder how the events we celebrate today pave the way to the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day, they are all deeply connected. Amen.