

Absolute Power Corrupts (Matthew 21:1-11)

10:00am Palm Sunday – 29th March 2026

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

‘Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

<Prayer>

I have mentioned to you on a couple of occasions in recent weeks, of a worrying effect I know as the *Cult of Leadership*. Like you, I'm sure we are all concerned about how the example of current world leaders is changing in a dangerous direction. **The Cult of Leadership is the effect of leaders gathering too much power to themselves.** More worrying is the enthusiastic apparent approval from their supporters that they should do so.

My sermon themes for Lent have been about placing your hope in the one who is worthy – **the greatest human example of hope and sacrifice.** Palm Sunday is pinch-point in the gospel story - literally. As Jesus arrives through the gate of Jerusalem, at the culmination of his earthly ministry, there was a last moment to decide – **is this one, and all he claims or stands for, a place for our future and our hope?**

All leaders stand at the pinnacle of something much greater than themselves. The leader carries a vision, represents a movement, an alliance, an association, or perhaps an ideology. It isn't just government either. How about religion, military or sports teams. Some leaders are good organisational managers, but that is not really the definition of leadership. **What is it like to hold the hopes of so many?**

National leaders need to be trusted, and they need to be good practitioners and protectors of truth and integrity. Where has our example come from, of the best and highest person? What background of society has absorbed and carried the highest values for centuries, to be seen in our leadership?

It is our Christian societal heritage, that is the person of Jesus Christ – the one who is still above, when you are at the top. This becomes especially true of those whose influence is backed by global power and reach. **The vital question is this - when you are the leader of so much, who is the leader of you?**

We can ask, *what has happened in these recent years, in the East in the West and especially in the middle?* It is all very complicated in global relations, and I admit – difficult to resolve by balance and consensus. **Some say now is the time for the strong and decisive leader, who has the power to act.** But we must be very careful in that call.

The Cult of Leadership is closely aligned to the Cult of Personality. Both of these effects surround us all. In these tendencies the leader is idealized and glorified to the point that followers exhibit unquestioning loyalty, often manipulated through charisma, spin and even psychological control. This is not just 1930s European history. The same tricks are with us now. **I'm all for the old political jostle, but in these people truth becomes tactical.** Anything may be said, as expedient.

Watch out for the populist leader, and the populist pretender, where the real challenges of politics, economy and life are presented as simplified vision of how it can all be. Often that is a filtering of history. They present a fool's gold, which claims there is another way – my way – **that only I can bring, just give me the power.** Rhetoric gets confused with actual ability.

The strong leader is a staple of history. It's a political model –as an alternative to consensual and representative leadership, as an alternative to the parliaments and governments of the day, and even to democracy and worst of all to truth and morality.

Let me tell you about a man called Thomas Hobbes. Born 1588, he lived at time of extreme turmoil. In every state, the right rule was a tussle between religion, absolute monarchy and the will of the people – all very violent. In the same way that we can look back on the fairly recent World Wars and know they were global game-changers, so Hobbes could look back on the game-changers of his time – the end medieval feudalism and the line of Plantagenets, 100-years of civil war, Henry VIII (and all that fiasco), the Reformation, the reign of terror under Mary I, The Spanish Armada, the execution of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell and the Restoration of monarchy, I could go on. **Where and what was strong leadership above all of this wreckage?** Hobbes is seen as one of the fathers of modern political philosophy. From him came the concept of the *social contract* – the idea the idea of one strong, yet consensual and accountable leader – they don't need to be hereditary, but they must be very strong and very able.

If you know your history I can present to you Alexander the Great, Julius Ceaser, Henry VIII, Oliver Cromwell, Napolean Bonapart and the fascists of the 1930s. All of these sounded great at the time – strong personalities - yes, some were real achievers, but most ended badly, and all of them left behind a pretty big mess and often a lot of casualties (including their own reputation). **‘For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their own soul?’ You would not teach good leadership off the back of any of these.**

So it was for those living at the time of Jesus. They knew turmoil from their 150 previous years. A great tussle between the regional powers, all very violent, no consensual leadership at all, military occupation interspersed with revolution.

Around 30AD a man rode into Jerusalem in the recognisable form of a coming king. He was a very strong leader and very popular character indeed. **Many of the devices of populist leaders were to be found in him too.** The humble beginnings, the background story, the rhetoric, the awesome spectacles seen, the clear distilled vision, the easily transmissible phrases, the challenge to norms, the promised hope found in 'me', and the promised glory to come. He arrived through a gate of history to shouts of *Hosanna – save us. We are hoping that you are the one.* **The following days would shake the Earth like nothing since those first few days of Creation.**

But we would not expect to add strong and popular Jesus to that last horror show of characters, so what is the difference if their traits were very similar?

- Jesus took praise like a mirror takes an image – it did not stick to him, he didn't want it to. He did not do fawning flattery, as the populist loves and needs. He was humble in the most powerful sense: **“Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** Just look at the words of our first reading again.
- Jesus was the ideal man, the son of God, but he **rarely claimed exclusivity.** Jesus did not do the big 'only me' thing, apart from when he was pointing people to God the Father. In fact, it was the opposite. He wanted people to become like him – copy me, learn from me. **“Take My yoke upon you, for I am gentle and humble in heart”. “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.”** **But the populist always wants to be the only one – sometimes murderously so.**

- Jesus had great spectacles (I don't mean his glasses). Those legendary moments were all focussed on the other. **He taught them, he healed them, he fed them.** Normally after such sessions he would disappear to be alone, not to hang around for the plaudits. Rarely did he need to keep reminding people of his achievements.
- Jesus identifies himself with the crowds – that is: *everyone*. He did not campaign by race or nation (as all the populists like to do), but by encompassing all as beloved of God, equally called. **For Him it was the Kingdom of God, not our kingdom or our country.**
- His ultimate goal would be sacrifice – as this week reminds us. It always was his goal. **Sacrifice is not a key goal of populists and influencers.** But for Jesus it was his crowning glory.

Indeed, leadership must contain sacrifice. The power of leadership can be overplayed. The leader must limit themselves. There must be just and gentle rule, as with Christ.

Now let me bring this all to an end.

Lord Acton, was a 19th century English historian and moralist, who emphasized that **liberty and morality are inseparable, and that political power must always be limited to prevent abuse.** He argued that authority should exist for the sake of liberty, and when it does not, it becomes mere force. In all his work he **warned against the concentration of power**, and stressed the importance of accountability and ethical governance. Lord Acton is responsible for that timeless quotation: *'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'*

On Palm Sunday, it does feel like we are again in the gates of history, where the pinch-point is urging us to redefine our leaders.

My message is this – you will not find an effective leader who is so strong and popular **that they can dispense with those things which are higher than themselves** – consensus, justice, fairness, virtues based upon faith, and the humility to serve to their own cost. Jesus was clear in whose name he was working: **‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’** I repeat my earlier question - **when you are the leader of so much, who is the leader of you?** Accord nothing to any who cannot answer that question.

Amen