

March 25, Palm Sunday B (Mark 11:1-11)

## **Humility isn't a stunt for Jesus—it's a condition of his life.**

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue

*Read the author's [column on the Liturgy of the Passion](#).*

Years ago there was an American politician famous for showing up to campaign appearances in a used red pickup truck. The truck was a gimmick, leased for the campaign and intended to create a particular persona. But it was a successful gimmick: not only did he win, but for years and years this politician was known more for the truck than for anything he did in office. It didn't seem to matter that he drove it only into and out of campaign stops, switching to a more suitable ride once the voters and cameras were out of sight.

Humble gestures are a critical tool for the powerful. They are a kind of confidence game, establishing a bond with people without sacrificing any actual power or prestige. They are polarizing. People favorable to the powerful individual will see the gesture as genuine, or at least as an honest and respectful kind of fraud. Skeptics will see manipulation and condescension.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem in Mark's Gospel, he does so with some of the trappings of the triumphal processions known in his world: shouts of acclamation, palm branches and garments laid down in his path. Compared to the massive celebrations in Rome, Jesus' triumphal entry is a modest affair—modest enough to seem almost like a parody. Crowds are everywhere in Mark's Gospel up to this point, even in little villages, but not here. The text gives us license to imagine a rather small parade indeed.

And at the center of the entrance to Jerusalem is the trouble about the colt. Jesus tells his disciples to tell anyone who asks that the Lord needs it. He is no doubt playing on the ambivalence of a term that has both religious and political senses, inspiring compliance out of love in the first sense or, failing that, fear in the second.

Then he rides in on the colt. That is, on an animal rather than on foot, but on a modest animal rather than an imposing one.

The difference between Jesus taking charge of a colt (or, in John's version, a donkey) for his triumph and a king or general adopting the same animal as a show of humility is that, for the great man, this would be a gesture. He could select the right animal from among his stores and spoils to make the desired impression. For Jesus, the colt is not even his, but borrowed. It is not a show of humility, it is humility in fact—humility as a condition.

This borrowing is consistent with the rest of Jesus' life. He borrows his parade and his mount. In the next chapter he borrows a coin to illustrate a point about taxes. He borrows his lodgings and his earthly father. In Luke's account he borrows his birthplace, and by all accounts he borrows his grave.

When we celebrate the procession of Palm Sunday as an unambivalent high point, we are liable to miss the terrible fragility in all this borrowing and patching together. Mark's account, unlike John's or Matthew's, does not even note the fulfillment of the prophet's word about a humble king. The story proceeds without that assurance. The people acclaim Jesus with an appeal to save ("Hosanna!") as one who comes in the name of the Lord (echoing the psalm), and a blessing on the "coming kingdom" of David. Mark's bare account feels a little more desperate and risky than the others.

Then the episode ends with an anticlimax. In Matthew Jesus throws the city into turmoil, in Luke he makes lamentation over it, and in John the Pharisees lament that the world is going after him. But in this version, Jesus enters Jerusalem, sees the temple, and since it's late, just leaves again with the Twelve for Bethany.

What we see in this passage is the opposite of the confidence games played by powerful people to win over, or else intimidate, a population. There is no false humility, no show of force, no bandwagon, no manipulation, no misdirection from his real agenda. Jesus' way of moving through the world conforms entirely with the content of his message and with the thrown-together assembly that follows him.

Neither do we see a swift and uniform reversal of the city's response, from near-universal acclamation to bitter shouts for crucifixion. Modern celebrations of Palm/Passion Sunday synchronize two moments separated by several chapters. Worshipers (and preachers) seem invited to identify with the Jerusalem masses in both phases. But there is no reason to assume that the rabble waving palms and the

rabble demanding Jesus' death are the same—or are representative of the city as a whole. In Mark's story, Jesus is very much a newcomer in a city that is going about its business. The popular response to his entry is less than all-encompassing.

This is a challenge and an opportunity. The truly humble Messiah and the politician feigning humility have nothing in common except that they provoke both acclaim and opposition, while leaving many lukewarm, inattentive, or dubious in between. When Christians ritually identify with the shouting crowd of Jerusalem, we may forget that not everyone saw themselves in this story—even then, in the holy city roiled by a man surrounded by messianic claims. So much less would everyone see themselves in it now.

But perhaps we, as a church and a society, can see ourselves more clearly on the sidelines, as the indifferent or marginally persuadable who may note some disturbance in our world but see no strong need to take a position on it. The sleepy letdown at the end of the story addresses our world that feels neither the demand to respond nor the desire to castigate, neither the yearning pull of faith nor the scorn of rejection, neither the praise nor the blame. In that null moment the course of Mark's Gospel, and everything after it, changes.