

# Controlling Interest

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday

17 April 2011

I wonder if you watched the Masters Golf Tournament from Augusta, Georgia, last weekend. Wasn't it exciting? Just when you thought that lovely young fellow from Northern Ireland, Rory McIlroy, was going to win easily, he had one wayward drive and lost his grip on the Green Jacket. Nevertheless, it was great "edge-of-the-seat" stuff for those who love the game of golf!

I always enjoy watching the Masters. The fine golf. The beautiful, rolling Georgia hills. The colourful magnolias in full bloom. But my enjoyment of this tournament is always more than a little tempered by the way in which the event is so tightly choreographed by the good ol' Southern boys of the Augusta National Golf Club headed by chairman, Billy Payne.

The CBS television producers, for instance, do not have free reign to cover the event in the way that they might deem best. For instance, they are told exactly which camera angles to use to show the course in the best possible way. No more than four minutes of commercials are allowed in an hour compared to the usual twelve. The music played during broadcasts as well as the graphics displayed also have to meet very rigid standards.

TV commentators are also tightly controlled. No reference may be made to balls going into "the rough". Instead, balls at the Masters go into the "second cut". People in the gallery may not be referred to as "fans" but as "patrons". And the patrons themselves have to behave according to a strict code of conduct. No running on the course to get to the next hole and find a good viewing position. No jeans or any denim clothing may be worn. And pity help the patron who exuberantly shouts "In the hole!" or "You're the man!".<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we don't need to go as far as Augusta to see events that are tightly choreographed these days. We see it daily in the election coverage on TV. Did you think that events involving the party leaders touring a factory, meeting with a group of schoolchildren or mingling with people at a local market were actually spontaneous? Well, silly you!

CTV reported recently just how much preparation goes into each of these stops with advance parties planning almost every detail. The people in the background behind Harper, Ignatieff and Layton are usually handpicked to ensure that the "right" people are there for the particular occasion – young people if need be, or maybe seniors or those of ethnic background. Then, particular attention is paid to the placement of any banners or signs that are in view and, of course, matters

such as lighting, sound equipment, teleprompters, makeup and clothing are all carefully prepared to enhance the image of the party leaders in the best possible way. Nothing is left to chance to ensure that the right message gets across either by direct or subliminal methods.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we are not really surprised by this. We are well used to the fact that that in the world of politics or business or professional sports, or in other areas of life where it is important to mould public opinion or to protect an image or to make money, that such Machiavellian methods are daily being used to manipulate our thoughts and opinions.

But, though the presence of such controlling interests are par-for-the-course in today's world, it is surprising to see that such forces were also at work in biblical times. And that they were employed, horror of horrors, by none other than Jesus himself! I must confess that, for as long as I can remember reading the passage from Matthew 21 about the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, I have been troubled by the choreography at work on that first Palm Sunday and often have been at pains to understand and explain it.

In the Palm Sunday story, when Jesus draws near to Jerusalem the first thing he does is to send two of his disciples on ahead with these instructions, "Go to the village there ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied up with her colt beside her. Untie them and bring them to me. And if anyone says anything, tell him, 'The Master needs them'; and then he will let them go at once."<sup>3</sup> Does this not tell us that Jesus must have been involved in a certain amount of stage-managing of his entry into Jerusalem? If he was able to tell the disciples to go for the donkeys and where exactly they would find the donkeys, as well as what to say if they were called to give an explanation, does this not mean that, in the days beforehand, Jesus had been carefully controlling exactly how the events would unfold?

Of course, when we become aware of such pre-planning today, where we would normally expect spontaneity, we immediately jump to the conclusion that there must be some nefarious scheme abroad. But where Jesus was concerned this could not have been the case because it would have been against his very nature. So if he did stage-manage his entry into Jerusalem it must have been to achieve a purpose with a profoundly good intention.

All of which begs the question: What could this purpose have been? Why did Jesus set things up the way he did with regard to his entry into the Holy City on the

back of a donkey? Was it simply to fulfil the great prophecy of Zechariah that the Messiah would come “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”?<sup>4</sup> Maybe so. Maybe Jesus wanted to help people realise exactly who he was.

However, maybe there was another reason. And maybe it was to show people that he was doing things in a different way than they might expect. He was marching to the beat of a different drummer. He was going to confront the secular and religious powers of his day but he was going to do it on his terms, with a different kind of power – the power of goodness, humility, non-violence and human weakness. A power that, paradoxically, down through history, has so often shown itself to be more powerful than the greatest human power.

Says one writer, “When Mahatma Gandhi came to England, at the height of the crisis between England and its colony of India, he went first to the textile workers in Liverpool, the very ones who had been hurt by the boycott of English textiles in India. He attempted to explain to them his aspirations and why he was leading India in this way. Gandhi therefore subverted political expectations. Powerful political leaders, upon arriving in a country, (usually) first pay their homage to other powerful political leaders. Gandhi did otherwise, a man arriving not with a conquering army, but (simply) wrapped up in a (plain white) sheet.”<sup>5</sup>

In an even greater way, on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus wanted to show his power was a power of a different kind. That God his Father had invested in him a power that was different from what the world conceived as being power. A power that would ultimately reign supreme. A power that would change the world.

And we, as Christ’s followers, must always remember that that same power is also invested in us. So often, we feel that our Christian Faith has lost ground in today’s world, that it no longer has the same influence and authority it once had. Nevertheless, let’s never forget that, despite all this, God is wielding his power through us. And it is a power that, if we just but realise it and channel it, will change the hearts and minds of many around us, and greatly impact our world today.

So Jesus carefully arranged events on that Palm Sunday to let people know about the nature of his power in the world. But there was also something else of equal importance that he wanted them to know.

Can you just think, for a moment, of how Jesus must have felt that day he rode into Jerusalem on the donkey? On the one hand, his heart must have been gladdened by the great reception he received with people waving palms, laying cloaks on the ground in front of him and shouting the welcoming hosannas. But, underneath it all, he knew only too well what lay in wait for him at the end of it all – the hostility, the

antagonism, the evil of the forces arrayed against him, lurking in the background. Yet, he was able to remain cool, calm and composed in the face of it all sending out a powerful message not just about his courage but about his deep trust in God, that his heavenly Father would look after him no-matter-what and come-what-may.

“Some years ago,” says United Methodist Bishop William Willimon, “I had the honour of hosting Dr. Billy Graham at Duke (University) Chapel for an unforgettable Sunday. The week before Graham arrived, the office of university security called and said that they had to have an urgent meeting with me. At the meeting, they asked questions like, ‘Will Graham be bringing his own security people?’ They told me that all of his security forces needed to be registered with the university police. If he was not bringing sufficient police with him, then the university police needed to be notified so that they could augment their security forces. I was also told that the chapel must be emptied for at least three hours before the service, in order that a thorough search could be made for bombs. I therefore dutifully called Dr. Graham, asking him about what security arrangements he required. Dr. Graham replied, ‘I have the Lord as my security. I plan to fly into Raleigh-Durham on Saturday afternoon and rent a car and drive it over to the hotel myself It’ll just be me.’ My already high esteem for Billy Graham rose to greater heights. He refused to be labeled by the university as another celebrity, a ‘big name.’ He was determined to be a follower of the Lord who entered the capitol city riding on a donkey.”<sup>6</sup>

As we Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century– we who are so used to putting our trust in worldly things such as ourselves, our human ingenuity, our money, our property, our identity, our reputation, our traditions – as we watch the events unfolding on that first Palm Sunday let us, like Billy Graham, remember that, above all, the Lord is our true security. That we must put our ultimate trust where it rightfully belongs – in God, our heavenly Father. Especially when the going gets rough and we are up against situations and forces that seem beyond our control, let our souls be still and let us know that we need not fear because everything is within the control of one who loves and cares for us beyond our imagining.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: The Masters, [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

<sup>2</sup> Source: CTV News c. 11-15 April 2011

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 21:1-3

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 9:9-10

<sup>5</sup> William Willimon, “Jesus: Redefining Monarchy”, *Pulpit Resource*, April 17, 2011, p.13

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.