

JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

Lent 6 Year B Palm Sunday

Is. 50:4-9a; Ps. 118:1,2,19-29; Phil. 2:5-11; John 12:12-16

Tannum 28/03/2021

The story is told of a minister who was full of energy and enthusiasm for the Lord. One day he went to the hospital to visit one of his parishioners who was critically ill. The minister entered the room and saw the man lying in bed with a whole host of tubes and wires attached to his body. Without any delay the minister strode over to his bedside in an effort to cheer him up. Soon the man became agitated and started to wave his arms. This encouraged the minister, and so he encouraged him even more enthusiastically.

Finally the minister ended with a rather lengthy prayer. At the final "Amen" the minister opened his eyes just in time to see the man reach for a pad of paper and a pencil. Quickly he wrote something and handed it to the minister. Then the man turned his head and died. The minister was deeply moved to think that his visit to this man had occurred in the nick of time. Then he looked at the pad and read these words: "You are standing on my oxygen tube."

Sometimes it's easy to misread people's actions. Not all arm-waving is an expression of enthusiasm. Not all laughter is the laughter of happiness. Not all tears are tears of sorrow. Not all shouting is the shouting of triumph and victory. And not everyone who says, "Lord! Lord!" will enter the kingdom of God.

Palm Sunday stands as that one day of the church year on which misunderstanding is most clearly evident. Jesus enters Jerusalem amid shouts of welcome and triumph from an optimistic crowd. Five days later the same crowd shouts for his crucifixion. What changed from Palm Sunday to Good Friday? It wasn't Jesus who changed. What changed was the crowd's awareness of who Jesus really was. On Palm Sunday the crowd thought he was the saviour who would give them what they wanted. By Good Friday they realized he wasn't. And that angered them enough to call for his execution.

The account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover festival is a perfect example of the conflict that we often find within the church, between what we might term, 'popular or folk religion' and a more correct understanding of the gospel message. Let me explain what I mean by that.

We have all come here this morning with a certain understanding of what church is about—how we understand the Bible, who God is, who Jesus is and the nature of his ministry, the nature of salvation—and all kinds of things relating to how we should worship, what kinds of music we ought to sing, and how it should all be put together. These different understandings or pre-conceptions have come from a number of avenues—how we were brought up, the generation in which we grew up, what we were taught in Sunday School and our previous experience of church and worship.

The truth is, we often have pre-conceived ideas about many of the biblical and theological issues that address us throughout the Scriptures. If we were to talk about the nature of Jesus Christ, or the role of the church within society, or issues such as righteousness, forgiveness and the grace of God, we would conjure up different understandings in different people's minds. And we in the church struggle with that dichotomy throughout our own lives.

For instance, many talk freely about the grace of God, yet struggle in their own lives by trying to be 'good enough'. We constantly seek the forgiveness of God for our sins, yet find it so hard to forgive others. We talk about the freedom given to us through the gospel, yet so often we require conformity from others. It is these misunderstandings—these expectations—that form the popular religion of our day. The sad thing is, as my theology lecturer at Trinity College was fond of saying, "Popular religion will always win over good theology."

So, in a sense, it's not all that surprising that those who welcomed Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a young donkey, totally misunderstood the true nature of the kingship that they were proclaiming for Jesus.

John's record of Jesus' entry is very helpful for our understanding of the *true* significance of what happened, as opposed to what constituted the popular belief of the multitude. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, crowds of people lined the streets, welcoming him as their king—their Saviour—their Messiah—and bound up with all their shouts of "hosanna", was their understanding of what that meant.

For Jewish people in the middle of Roman occupation, some 2,000 years ago, the concept of the messianic king was one who would come in all his military might and prowess to overthrow their Roman oppressors. Their prophets foresaw the coming of a kingly Messiah, who would deliver their people from oppression and bring in the eternal kingdom of God on earth. To the folk who were engaged in the popular religion of the day, Jesus of Nazareth seemed, at first, to fit their understanding of what this king should be like. He healed people, proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God and defied the hypocritical religious leaders of their day.

The time seemed right. Jesus was making his way towards Jerusalem at, what we might say, the height of his career. He had performed amazing miracles and his teaching was second to none. In the rush and enthusiasm generated by the expectations of the Passover festival, people flocked to Jesus' side. Many were pilgrims coming from all over Israel and those in Jerusalem, who had heard of his fame, were coming out of the city to meet him on the way, greeting him as their national hero. "Hosanna!" they cried out, waving Palm branches above their heads. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the king of Israel."

The people were proclaiming Jesus as their king—and king he was—but their understanding of what that meant was radically different to the message that Jesus was trying to portray.

John tells us, that in the midst of the shouting and revelry—in the midst of the people proclaiming him as king—Jesus came across a young donkey and sat upon it for his procession into Jerusalem. This should have been the first hint that something in their understanding was amiss. “Where was the horse, the white charger that truly befitted the king of Israel? What’s with the donkey?” Fortunately for us, we know why. John states that Jesus rode in on a donkey to fulfil Zechariah’s prophecy concerning the Messiah,

Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!

Yes, Jesus *is* king, but not the warrior king whom the crowd wants to greet with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna.” He is, instead, the fulfilment of Zechariah’s vision of the Prince of Peace, who comes, not as a military leader, but as a humble and peaceful servant-king. Jesus was not the political saviour that they were expecting. As the Prince of Peace, he was the very revelation and presence of God himself, who by his procession into Jerusalem—the very heart of Jewish worship—declared the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth.

The thing is, no one other than Jesus really understood what was happening at the time. In verse 16, John tells us that even the disciples didn’t understand the meaning of this event until after Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. John doesn’t tell us what the disciples were doing as Jesus rode along in procession, but it shouldn’t be too difficult to imagine what could have taken place. The disciples would also have been eager for Jesus to establish His kingdom quickly, just as the people did. They were very aware of the opposition to Jesus, and of the dangers that faced them in Jerusalem. They accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem with fear and trepidation. What a shock it must have been to see what appears to be the entire city of Jerusalem welcoming Jesus (and them!) with open arms. At last, they had truly arrived. This kingdom was here! ...But how deceiving appearances can be.

On Good Friday we participate in reading the account of Jesus’ crucifixion. When we get to the part where the crowd shouts out the words, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” many people become uncomfortable—perhaps it’s a little too close to home. But it should be no less uncomfortable for us on Palm Sunday when we shout the words, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” On both days the crowd then and the church today can easily misunderstand the true meaning of Jesus. We want a saviour who lives up to our expectations—who preaches the kind of message that we want to hear—who makes us

feel good about ourselves—and when our expectations are not realized—when our pre-conceptions are challenged—our shouts of exaltation become shouts of rejection.

The difference between Palm Sunday and Good Friday is the difference between our false expectations and the truth of who Jesus is for us. So often, we don't want to bridge that gap. We're happy in our ignorance. We've built our whole lives on our pre-conceptions and anything that gets in the way—including the truth—will be despised and crucified, just as they despised and crucified Jesus when they discovered that *he* didn't fit in to *their* theology.

Jesus was popular...for a while. But popularity is deceptive, especially for the church. We want to be popular—we want people to fill the pews—we want the accolades—but are we prepared for the truth—can we handle the truth? (with apologies to Jack Nicholson) When the church begins to sacrifice the truth for the sake of popularity or conformity with ill-conceived expectations, it has totally lost the plot.

The minister who visited the man in the hospital thought that when the man waved his arms he was approving of what the minister was saying. The fact is that the man was being suffocated, because the minister was standing on his lifeline of oxygen. The minister's task was to promote life, not win the apparent enthusiasm of the patient. By the same token, the church's task is to promote life, not win popularity contests that may only mask the dying of those who are giving the acclaim. The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is testimony to God's desire that the world should have life and have it abundantly. It's also testimony to how deeply the world is in bondage to sin and selfishness—to the point of deliberately misunderstanding God.

As the church celebrates Palm Sunday, it is remembering the past through the lens of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. Palm Sunday is not merely a commemoration of a past event—it is, rather, the point at which the significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem becomes real for us in our worship. It is one way in which the church participates in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. Palm Sunday is not one more excuse for a parade—rather, it is a moment for us to reflect on Jesus' identity as the divine One who came in human likeness to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God and who, through his death, resurrection and ascension brings us back into right relationship with God.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.