

Brancepeth Sermon: Palm Sunday 2022

10 April 2022

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Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-end

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of all our hearts
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Hester and I didn't get to the crossroads this year,
but on most Palm Sundays you will find us there
joining the procession, joining the singing
and so blending our voices with all those who have
taken part in Palm Sunday processions over the centuries,
and ultimately with the clamour on that day
two millennia ago
when the crowds cheered Jesus into Jerusalem.

This year, as I have prepared to preach this sermon
and thought about what we are doing when we join in
with those crowds and their shouts of praise,
I've found my reflections taking me to quite a difficult place.

So, with apologies that this may not be quite the right tone for a cheerful Palm Sunday, let me try to explain why.

Think about that crowd on the first Palm Sunday, and what *they* thought was going on, what they were shouting about, as they called out

Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!

One clue comes from the fact that Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a colt, because the people would have recognised that and known what it meant.

They would have known that there's a verse in Zechariah – a verse that Luke doesn't quote, though it's there in Matthew's version of the story – and it says

'Lo, your *king* comes to you;
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

And we tend to read that, I think, as meaning that Jesus was coming in to Jerusalem as a humble king, the gentle ruler, the prince of peace.

But is that who the crowds thought they were welcoming?

Well, perhaps not.

Let me read you the wider passage from Zechariah

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and *victorious* is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will *cut off* the chariot from Ephraim

and the warhorse from Jerusalem;

and the battle-bow shall be cut off,

and he shall *command* peace to the nations;

his *dominion* shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Can you hear the language in that passage:

‘triumphant’, ‘victorious’, ‘command’, ‘dominion’?

What did this crowd think was happening?

Who did they think was riding into town?

And this is the point at which you might understand why,

preaching on this material this year,

my thoughts took quite a dark turn,

because I want you to remember that

these people in Jerusalem are a people under occupation.

A foreign army has invaded,
and has imposed its rule on the region,
making it part of their vast empire

Some of the people in Jerusalem
have made an uneasy peace with the invaders;
some of them have worked out how to
profit from the occupiers' presence;
some by contrast agitate against them,
and keep up the resistance -
but they all know that they are living under occupation;
they all know where the power lies.

And they all know that Roman rule is
a rule based on overwhelming force.
They know that it is ultimately based on violence,
and that if they step out of line, or just get in the way,
the Romans won't hesitate to use that violence.

And it is in that context that they've heard about this Jesus,
this leader who has arisen unexpectedly,
who has galvanised crowds,
who has been trekking slowly towards Jerusalem.
And they've heard about his deeds of power.
They've heard that he can work miracles

And so they are thinking,
'Surely, now, at long last - surely this is God's anointed one!
Surely rescue is finally at hand!'

They are longing for freedom
for something to set against Rome's power,
someone to stand against that power.

And maybe Jesus is the one.

Maybe he is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Maybe he is the king, riding in on a donkey,
who will nevertheless sweep away
the Roman chariots and swords and spears,
free them from the occupying army,
and command real peace.

Maybe he will be the one mightier even than the Romans.

Maybe he will be the one to restore the kingdom to Israel.

And they are not wrong to want any of that.

It should be more obvious than ever to us at the moment
that they are not wrong -

that being invaded and subdued by a foreign army,

being ruled by violence,

being subject to the whims of a distant tyrant,

and the caprice of his local forces -

that all of that is simply unbearable,

that they are right to cry out against all that
and to long for rescue.

But now think about the Pharisees,
the ones who say ‘Teacher, order your disciples to *stop*.’
They are not stupid or wicked either.

Maybe they simply fear reprisals.

Yes, they don’t think Jesus is the anointed one,
but that means they don’t think that today
is the beginning of the revolution.

They don’t think that this is the beginning of the end
of the occupation.

They think this Jesus is just another upstart
who is going to antagonise the Romans,
get himself killed,
and probably get many others killed too.

They know that the Romans have all the power,
that they respond to all threats with violence –
and so the Pharisees see death on the horizon.

‘Teacher, please, order your disciples to stop,’
they plead, ‘before we all get killed.’

And now think about Jesus.

He knows what the people are expecting.

There are incidents elsewhere in the gospels

where we are told that he knew the people

wanted to make him king by force -

and I guess that he knows the same is true here.

He knows what they're hoping for,

and he doesn't despise that desire.

He doesn't try to quieten the people down.

He doesn't berate them for their misunderstanding.

And I guess that he knows

what the pharisees are worried about too.

And perhaps knows that in one sense they're absolutely right

- this story *is* heading toward Roman violence,

toward the scattering of all these singing followers,

towards fear and death.

But he says,

'I tell you, if these people were silent,

the stones would shout out.'

He knows how deep the people's need is,

how much they are yearning to be saved.

He knows the burden under which they are struggling.

He knows that what it means to live under occupation,

what it is to be subject to the occupiers' violence.

And he knows that,
now that they have seen in him a glimmer of hope,
nothing will stop them crying out.
Nothing will stop this people's hope -
their desperate, yearning, pleading hope -
from being expressed.

But he also knows something else.
He knows that events are not going to go
the way that this crowd expects, the way that it yearns for.
He knows that he's not going to meet the Romans
with superior force.
He knows he's not going to bring a swift end
to the occupation;
he's not going to command a sudden peace.
He knows that he has not come bearing *that* kind of answer.

And he perhaps knows that,
when this crowd faces the shock of disappointment
that comes with his arrest,
his being handed over to Roman power,
some of them will turn on him, and call for him to be killed.

He knows what is coming.
He knows how dark it is going to get.

When we sing along on our processions today
we are not like the crowds on that first Palm Sunday,
because we too know what happens next.
We know that we are heading into Holy Week,
and that Good Friday is coming.
We proclaim Jesus as king,
but we know that he's not coming to rescue us,
and rescue those we care about,
with overwhelming military might,
with force that will push the invaders back over their border,
with power that will depose the tyrants
and create regime change.

We know that travelling with Jesus,
doesn't mean escape from suffering,
doesn't mean the end of violence,
doesn't mean the avoidance of death.
Jesus is not, it turns out, *that* kind of saviour.

But as we look at the week ahead
there *are* two other things that we know.

We know that however deep into darkness
our road takes us, and takes those whom we love,
those about whom we care,
God will be with us.

The road into darkness is a road he knows
a road he has travelled with open eyes.

He does not and will not leave us to travel it alone.

And we know that darkness is not the end of the story.

Arrest by the Romans was not the end of the story.

Condemnation and torture were not the end of the story.

Violence will not be the end of the story.

Occupation will not be the end of the story.

Homelessness and exile will not be the end of the story.

War crimes and horror will not be the end of the story.

Even *death* was not, and will not be, the end of the story.

So as we sing our Palm Sunday hymns

and proclaim our allegiance to Jesus as king,

knowing that Good Friday is coming,

and beyond it Easter Sunday,

that is what we are proclaiming:

We're proclaiming our trust in the God who is with us

and who will not let go,

who is with all who suffer

and who will not let them go,

even when the rescues that we long for

do not materialise,

even when the road does lead down into darkness.

And, I hope, we're committing ourselves to be God's people,
committing *ourselves* to be people
who will not abandon those who are suffering,
who will not forget or turn away,
who will continue to offer our help, our compassion,
our support
even when we can't see what difference it makes,
even when it seems a feeble response to
overwhelming violence,
even when all we can see of the road ahead is
its descent into the shadows.

The Lord will not abandon those who go down into darkness
The Lord will not let that darkness be the end of the story.

Blessed are those who come in the name of the Lord.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his *steadfast love* endures for *ever*.

Amen