



Revd Ro's Reflection on Palm Sunday

Philippians 2. 5-11

John 12. 12-16

Mark 11. 1-11

Today Palm Sunday Holy Week begins. Under usual circumstances the Palm Sunday service begins with the liturgy and the blessing of the palms followed by the procession to church. For many years we walked with two donkeys, Snowflake and George from Syerscote Lane. I have a lovely photograph of the congregation walking along behind the cross and the two donkeys. Later we had a donkey named King and luckily we usually had beautiful weather too!

During Holy week I will be writing a short reflection for each day. Some of the gospel readings we have already looked at so the ones I focus on may vary from those set. Of course the reading of the Passion narrative is central to Palm Sunday but I will not be studying the Passion today as I will focus on this on Good Friday. Today I will be looking at the entry into Jerusalem and will briefly mention Philippians 2 as I have already analysed this many times before. Palm Sunday is a day of triumph; the gospel readings set for today for the liturgy of the palms are from Mark and John.

Jesus, like thousands of other Jews was coming to celebrate the festival of Passover at Jerusalem. It is the aim of every Jew to do this. Even when celebrating the Seder meal at Passover in other countries the ending is the exclamation, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'

Passover is the celebration of freedom, when the Jewish people were led by Moses away from captivity in Egypt each family were instructed to bake unleavened bread and the lambs were killed and the blood was sprinkled on the doorpost and lintels of their houses so they were saved from harm when the angel of death passed over the land. They escaped captivity and crossed safely over the Red Sea at the parting of the waters in God's great act of deliverance.

Each year every Jewish family celebrates Passover. Jesus knows that this is his last journey and that he will die at Calvary. The synoptic gospels begin in a similar way when describing the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem, 'When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives' Mark 11. The Mount of Olives and the garden of Gethsemane are outside the walls of the city just to the east and the villages of Bethphage and Bethany are a little further east still. So Jesus would be approaching the city from the Jericho road.

His instructions to the two disciples are quite clear,

‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”

The people who see the disciples taking the colt act exactly as Jesus said they would. Matthews says, they will find a ‘donkey tied, and a colt with her; ‘and he follows it with these words,

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.’

This is from Zechariah 9.9 and is seen as Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of the coming of Israel’s king.

People would have heard about Jesus' wonders and ‘signs.’ In John’s gospel Jesus has just raised Lazarus to life. Of course they pour out to see him and they put their coats on the floor and wave branches taken from the trees. Jesus is welcomed as a King, he is welcomed as Messiah.

¹³‘So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!’

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵ ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,

sitting on a donkey’s colt!’

In the other gospels the words are slightly different,

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

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

Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

Jesus is “the ‘Son of David,’ he is seen as the Messiah. He is the blessed one ‘who comes in the name of the Lord.’ Now his popularity is at its highest. The crowd is shouting for him, the disciples despite Jesus warnings about the Son of Man approaching death, must have felt elated. This is not just the usual rabble rouser; this man is different, hailed as a royal king of David’s line and God’s Messiah. Of course we know that this week will culminate in God’s great act of deliverance through Jesus. His death and resurrection will bring salvation to all who believe in him and herald God’s new creation.

We know of the fear Herod the Great felt at the news of the ‘king born in Bethlehem.’ We know how he acted with the slaughter of the innocents. Here is Jesus now, he is a threat to Herod, a threat to the Romans because of his following; these people expected the Messiah to overthrow the Romans by force.

The entry has echoes of another triumphal march into Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus. He cleansed the Temple in December BC 164 and restored the services. The re-consecration of the Temple

became a permanent Jewish holiday, Hanukkah. One of Jesus' first actions is to overturn the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Although it was not the restoration of the Temple for worship it must have echoes of that earlier cleansing when the occupying force was overthrown.

Jesus is a threat to the Jewish leaders and priests and the religious circle who fear him and who are deeply jealous of him. Jealousy is one of the most powerful of forces and coupled with fear often can lead to destruction. These people want Jesus out of the way by fair means or foul. We already know this and have seen his clashes with the scribes and Pharisees on numerous occasions. In Luke's gospel at this point he tells us how they complained to Jesus

³⁹ 'Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' ⁴⁰He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

The gospel narrative of the raising of Lazarus which comes prior to this in John's gospel and which I will look at on Monday, has a warning from the disciples at the beginning, 'Let us go to Judea again.'

⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Later the chief priests are plotting, ⁵³'So from that day on they planned to put him to death.' and it ends ominously with these words, ⁵⁷'Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.'

By the time the Passion Narrative is read later in the service on Palm Sunday we have these words, Mark 14,

¹'It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; ²for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

The threat Jesus posed to them has now become the reason to kill him. Jesus knows the danger he is in, he knows what the authorities are plotting, and he knows crowds are fickle. Popularity one minute can turn to mob violence the next. However he knows that he is doing his Father's will and that only by his death in love can he redeem humanity and win salvation for us. So Holy Week begins and we know that Good Friday will follow.

In our services we have the liturgy of the palms, the story of the triumphal entry but the next reading is Philippians 2.5-25 with the crucifixion at the centre. Of all the bible passages this must be one of my favourites. I can't help but be amazed at the way like John 1 it deals with all the central tenets of our faith.

⁵ 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

It is a creedal statement and really a hymn of praise. It is worth learning by heart and using as a form of prayer. The lines here 'and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.' are central to the theme of Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

This 'hymn' speaks of service and it is the service we as Christians should practise ⁵'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' Jesus though he was God did not 'snatch at equality with God' but became human as we are and humbly obedient giving his life for us. Humility, service and love are what Jesus asks of us.

This reading introduces Jesus' Passion and it is followed in our service by the Passion Narrative which I will look at on Good Friday. This is a sombre week as we follow Jesus' footsteps to the cross but the end of the Philippians reading, 'Therefore God also highly exalted him' points beyond Good Friday to Easter Day and the resurrection. It points to joy and our redemption. Jesus is with his Father God and King of all.

*Ride on ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp ride on to die. Bow thy meek head to mortal pain then take
O God thy power and reign.* Henry Hart Milman

~~~~~