



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Palm Sunday

### Year C 2022

Luke 19.28-40

Philippians 2.5-11

Palm Sunday begins Holy Week. It is always bitter sweet, beginning as it does with the liturgy and blessing of the palms, this is followed by a procession to church sometimes with a donkey and the continuation of the service. This is symbolic of the rejoicing at the triumphal entry and we witness to Jesus our King. As we continue through the service the focus turns to the events of Holy Week. We have the long gospel reading the Passion narrative. This is included so that the worshipper who would attend church on Sundays does not simply move from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. Also we can see clearly the path that Jesus is walking in obedience to the divine plan. The Passion reading begins with the Last Supper and takes us through the events of Good Friday and Jesus' victory over evil on Calvary. It is bittersweet because the triumphal entry shows us how it could have been, how Jesus, the saviour of the world comes to his people as their Messiah, the anointed one. 'If only' always echoes around Palm Sunday. If only the Jews could have recognised him for who he was, if only their jealousy and spite had not led them to wickedness and to turning their back on God. The passage set for today is followed by a lament as Jesus mourns for the imminent destruction of the holy city. Last year, Year B, I followed the readings for Holy Week and wrote a Reflection for each day. This year I shall revisit them as part of my devotions in Holy Week. I wrote of the Passion on Good Friday last year so I will not do so today. Instead I am concentrating on the gospel reading for the liturgy of the palms.

Our gospel reading is from Luke and begins, <sup>28</sup> 'After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.'

Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem with a large crowd and he is teaching them, what he had 'said,' was to tell them the parable of the unjust steward and his master's anger and punishment of him. The

people who should be stewards to the Jewish nation are the religious leaders and groups like the Pharisees. They are meant to guide the people in their search for and obedience to God. They have failed abysmally; Jesus calls them 'blind guides' and he says they are leading the people straight into the ditch. They are like 'whitened sepulchres,' pristine on the outside but stinking with hypocrisy, which is abhorrent to God, inside. It is quite apparent to whom Jesus is referring in his parable and it wouldn't have done his popularity any favours with the powers that be. We know that they are already plotting to kill him and if possible Lazarus too.

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 today the ending is the exclamation, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'

Passover is the celebration of freedom, when the Jewish people were led by God's representative, 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.

Jesus knows that this is his last journey, it will be his last Passover and he will die at Calvary, this is his mission to lead his people to freedom. The gospel passages all relate the highly symbolic acts of Jesus. He is the Passover lamb; he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The timing of the events of Holy week is different in St. John's gospel and so he has Jesus dying on the cross at the time of the slaughtering of the Passover lambs to highlight this. Jesus' blood is shed to save humanity just as the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites at the Exodus.

The gospel passages which relate Jesus' entry into the city are very similar.

<sup>29</sup> 'When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives' 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. Jesus was approaching the city from the Jericho road. It was at Jericho that he had spoken to Zacchaeus inciting further discontent on the part of the onlookers at Jesus' words, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'<sup>6</sup> So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>7</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'<sup>8</sup> Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

This underlines his mission, underlines what he requires. God wants sincerity of heart, he wants repentance and a turning with the whole personality in love for him. 'Past put behind us for the future take us.' sums it up, repent, turn to God and live according to Jesus' teachings. Zacchaeus is not just aware of his past wrongdoing, he is saying sorry, he is active; he is promising reparation for what he has done wrong. Jesus makes it quite clear that this man is near to God and that those who think they have cracked it, got it right with God, actually are very far from him.

Jesus as he approaches Jerusalem gives precise instructions to his disciples making it very clear that he is in control and that he even knows what will happen when they go into the village ahead.

'he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.' Jesus knows that they will be challenged but the reply, 'The Lord needs it,' will silence them. Certainly the arrival of Jesus would have been known and people would have been expecting it. It is a huge honour that Jesus is riding their beast. In Matthew's gospel these words follow,

<sup>4</sup>'This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup>'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.' (Matthew 21)

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

<sup>32</sup> 'So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' <sup>34</sup>They said, 'The Lord needs it.' <sup>35</sup> Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.'

This is the symbol of humility, Jesus is the servant King and the passage from Philippians illustrates this wonderfully. Here is the creator of all that is, mounted on a beast of burden. Here is the King and Messiah, the fulfilment of the scriptures, entering the holy city quietly and with no more pomp than the stable in which he was born had. Later, at the Last Supper, Jesus will perform another act of humility and service as he washes his disciple's feet. The disciples have this lesson to learn; they must serve one another and learn to be served. It is a stark lesson to Peter who cannot comprehend Jesus kneeling at the feet of one who is unworthy. Peter has a lot to learn of Jesus' kingship. Jesus' teaching, 'Love God and love one another as I have loved you' is the key to true Christian behaviour. These men might be Jesus' chosen band but there is nothing superior about them. They have to understand that, just as we have that lesson to learn now. So Jesus continues on his journey and the crowds spread out their coats before him in John's gospel he writes,

<sup>12:13</sup>'They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him,' and in Mark, <sup>11:8</sup>'Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.' Thus we have the tradition of the palm branches. The acclamation is very similar but in Luke it is the disciples that are shouting,

<sup>37</sup> 'As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying,

'Blessed is the king

who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven,

and glory in the highest heaven!'

In Matthew's gospel,

<sup>21:9</sup> 'The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,  
'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

<sup>21:10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Jesus enters the city and the city is in 'turmoil,' this is the Messiah, this is Jesus, this is the Son of David, all these titles are correct. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah but he is much more. Jesus Christ is part of the Godhead; Jesus Christ is co-creator of all that is. The tragedy is that from the wonder of that entry, a few days later, the throne of the King they welcome would be Calvary. Already we have hints of this,

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

Already the Pharisees are trying to silence him, tell your disciples to shut up, how dare they say you are a king, how dare they say you are God's representative? They would be afraid of the crowds joining in. The powers that be are not just angry they recognise a threat to their power, their whole world order. Jesus is in great danger, even as the Hosannas ring around him, and he knows it. But for this he was born, the cross was in the cradle and Jesus walks the way of the cross in obedience. This mission must be fulfilled in love for humanity, and by his blood poured out for us we are freed, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus knows what crucifixion means, he knows it is cruel and evil, the agony on the garden shows us that. Yet he faces it, such is the power of love, divine love.

The atmosphere changes as Jesus enters the city it is he who gives this solemn warning and lament,

<sup>41</sup> 'As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, <sup>42</sup> saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.'

If only they had listened to him, if only they had turned to God this disaster, the destruction of the city and the centre of Jewish worship, the Temple brought on by foolish nationalistic pride could have been averted. He goes into the city and enters the Temple. Once again it is clear; Jesus is God's presence entering the house of God. His role now is to cleanse it from those who are turning it into a 'robber's den.'

Jesus' love is seen so clearly in Holy Week, his final sacrifice is the ultimate example of love never to be repeated. It is our privilege to remember his death and passion to 'do this in remembrance;' when we share the Lord's Supper, our Holy Communion, together.

Philippians chapter two is a wonderful reading to follow this gospel narrative. It is one of my favourite passages. Actually it is stunning in the theology encapsulated in those few short verses. It is a creedal statement and a hymn of praise.

Just look at these words, 'behold your King, humble and riding on a donkey.' Whenever we hear the words of this Messianic prophecy we see Jesus riding down the dusty road into Jerusalem. If you look at those words though and think about them you realise just how countercultural God's way, Jesus' way is. Even now when you say the word king or queen you inevitably think of pomp, pageantry and riches. In that time and for a long time afterwards, a King was not simply the figurehead but the ruler, but in many cases dictator. The King was a warrior who led his troops into battle and if successful, conquered all before him. A king or Emperor like this demanded all the trappings of power and riches. He was number one, kingpin, and everybody bowed down to him.

Paul is writing to the Philippians, (now the huge battle at Philippi in 42 BC had seen the forces of Brutus locked in combat with Mark Antony and Octavian). Anthony was victorious. Philippi was the home of veterans from all over the Empire. The Emperor Augustus had united the Empire and he was worshipped as a self-styled God. The Greeks were a conquered people; they knew all about warrior kings as did the Romans. The idea of a king, humble and riding on a donkey would have been as amazing as the idea of the king who hung on a cross. But this is exactly what Paul is preaching. Jesus is the King of creation who has turned the old ways upside down and expects behaviour which is totally opposite to the ways they have been used to. He is their example. Humility is the last thing they would expect from a ruler, indeed anyone in authority. Jesus underlines his new way when James and John are jockeying for position,

<sup>42</sup> 'So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

This is Jesus' commandment and commitment to service. It will lead to the ultimate service to humanity, giving his life that we might live.

Paul is writing to the Philippians and this teaching is by no means their norm. If you have riches, status and particularly power, it is right and proper to oppress people to keep it isn't it? Paul answers with an emphatic no. The ways they have been used to are not the way of God, not the way of Jesus Christ.

What immediately precedes this passage is this,

<sup>2:1</sup> 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.'

This is how Christians are to live, in harmony, in service, in love in community, putting the old ways, the old values behind and living in the new way according to Christ's teachings and not only his teaching but his example.



So follows this wonderful passage which is really a poem and I expect an early hymn of praise. The whole secret to the Christian life is this, <sup>5</sup> 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' He is our pattern, the pattern of any true Christian is to follow the example of Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> 'who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.'

Jesus was not just a king; Jesus is one with God, in perfect obedience to him because he is part of the Godhead. The humility of Jesus, the creator of all that is, is staggering. Next we have the explanations of the incarnation.

<sup>7</sup> 'but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.'

'emptied himself' does not mean of divinity. This is the wonder of our God, Jesus was God incarnate; fully human, fully divine. On earth he felt all that we feel, lived the life of a human, but sinless. He felt pain as a human being; the cross was what he endured for us in love. However this is not simply human love, Jesus is the crucified God; God hung on the cross in love for humanity. As the hymn puts it, Mary 'knew the cost of love divine when Jesus Christ was slain.' Jesus brought the good news of God to his people; he saved humanity from sin and death and at his resurrection conquered sin and death forever. The resurrection is the key to everything.

<sup>9</sup> 'Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.'

This is the great mystery of our faith, the great truth of our faith, we worship one God in three persons. Jesus was in the beginning with God, and Jesus is with God taking our 'humanity to the heights of his throne.' What we see during Holy Week and at Calvary is the depth of divine love, God's love for humanity. We see God with us, dying in love for us. Easter is the great triumph as Jesus vanquishes death and is alive again. He is human and divine, his body is very real and he is at pains to point this out.

This then is the God you worship, says Paul; he is your pattern in life and in all that you do. Worship your God, the God who came humble and riding on a donkey, the God who washed the feet of twelve poor men, the God who suffered death for you and who rose again. You must live together in love, putting each other's needs first.

'and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.'

The only Lord is Jesus Christ, not Caesar, not anyone! All earthy kings are insignificant compared to Jesus, the King who is God. Jesus is one with the only true God. Many people were to die for the confession, 'Jesus is Lord' but it is the central truth. Jesus' way of life, his humility, service and love is the pattern for us.

*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

~~~~~