

Palm Sunday Sermon

5th April 2020

Matthew 21.1-11

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem marks the beginning of Holy Week, the most sacred week of the Christian year. As a marked man, he knew that within the week he would be executed as a political rebel, a rabble-rouser and a religious heretic, one who threatened the status quo. But rather than arrive surreptitiously, Jesus courageously announced his presence to a tense, over-crowded city, swamped with pilgrims arriving from all over the Mediterranean world for the annual celebration of Passover - the most holy time in the Jewish calendar.

At the same time that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem from the east on the back of a donkey, Pontius Pilate, with the authority of the Roman empire, was proudly riding into the city from the west on his magnificent horse, surrounded, not by pilgrims but by his cavalry and foot soldiers. They were to keep the peace in a city always on the edge of rebellion, but especially at this time, a city tense with excited expectation that finally God was about to act. The atmosphere was volatile, and Pilate was quite able to do whatever was needed to keep an uneasy and resentful peace.

There was bound to be trouble. No one was allowed to challenge the authority of the 'god'-emperor Tiberius, or the authority of the priests and the Jerusalem elite without repercussions.

Was Jesus' arrival a political challenge?

Yes, he rode into the city, as had many of Israel's kings in the past, to the acclamation of the pilgrims. But there was no room in Jerusalem for two kings.

But he rode not a war-horse but a humble donkey, a symbol that he was fulfilling a 500-year old prophecy of Zechariah, coming as the expected king of peace to end all warfare (Zech 9.9-10).

But his followers wanted and expected action, an end not only to Roman rule but also to oppression by the rich Jewish elite who lived off the back of the other 90% of the peasant population. So they shouted 'Hosanna to *the Son of David*'. Hosanna - '*Save now!*' Save us and restore to us the Kingdom as it was under King David nearly 1000 year before.

But that was not Jesus' way. He was not about to overthrow the Romans government, fully aware as he was of their injustice and oppression.

He was a realist too - he said, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's'. He would say to Pilate at his trial that his kingdom was not of this world.

He entered Jerusalem as the suffering Servant, knowing his throne would be the Cross (Isa.53).

Jesus' challenge was also directed at the religious authorities who guarded the sacredness of Temple worship.

He came as the long-awaited prophet like Moses, bringing them once more the words of God's after centuries of apparent silence (Deut. 18.15,18).

He came calling people to repent and believe the good news, for the Kingdom of God is near (Mk.1.15), calling people to live by the Kingdom values of justice and peace, of caring for the needy, of loving God, loving one's neighbour and loving oneself, because He first loved us.

But the Jerusalem authorities did not want to hear those words.

He came to cleanse the Temple from the practices of corrupt worship, and offer himself as the only effective sacrifice for sin for all eternity.

He came to die, accepting that this was God's will and purpose for his life
- to open up for us all a way into God's kingdom, a way into a new and deeper relationship with God as Father.

His was a kingdom of hearts and minds.

Jesus' actions over this week challenged people to see, to think and ask the question - 'what did all this mean?' Would they see the contrast between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms, between earthly rulers and God? Would they understand his challenge to accept God, not Caesar, as their ultimate authority? Would they recognise and accept what Jesus was offering them through his death? Would they come to believe in him as their crucified Messiah, as Son of God?

But most couldn't or wouldn't see this. Most, disappointed, disillusioned, within a few days were braying for his blood. He had failed them. They couldn't recognize that Jesus was offering them so much more than they what they thought they needed.

Jesus lived in this 'real' world, just as we do.

We have no choice - we live in this world, God's world, enfolded in His love, as part of His creation.

Jesus is offering us a way to live with Him in this world alongside the sin we see in ourselves, and all around us. He is calling us to live in the knowledge that God's Kingdom is near, living by the values of this Kingdom, under the ultimate authority of a loving and merciful God who desires that we all shall know the intimacy of his love. He is calling us to live with one foot in this world and one foot in God's Kingdom.

That means living as good and responsible citizens of this world too, ensuring the wellbeing of others in whatever way we can, as we have seen many doing over the last few days. For wherever there is love, there is God.

And that means that we may also be called upon, like Jesus, to peacefully challenge actions of authorities that are contrary to the values of God's Kingdom rule, because God is the ultimate authority and ruler over the whole universe. And we continue to pray every day in the Lord's Prayer for the full coming of God's Kingdom.

Amen.

Revd Elaine Bisson, 5 April 2020.