

Palm Sunday 02 April 2023

'Be A Worshipper'

Luke 19: 28-40

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It's lovely to be together as we continue with our series into Luke's gospel and, of course things are hotting up as we now begin to enter into the final phase of Jesus' earthly ministry.

It's the week in which Christians all over the world unite to reflect on God's grace and immeasurable love for us as the Passion story unfolds.

The week which will culminate in the fulfilment of the most famous verse in the whole Bible, John 3:16,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life"

What a spectacle it must have been; if you close your eyes it's easy to picture the scene; crowds of people with beaming smiles on their faces.

Jubilant scenes of palm branch waving; Children clambouring to get near the front to see the procession; the spreading of cloaks along the path. Shouts of praise, acclamation and worship.

It must have been like watching Bristol Rovers playing a cup final at Wembley on a Sunny Saturday afternoon!

As we look together now at this passage, I'd like us to have only one question in mind:

Who do the people think they are worshipping?

So, to give some context, we need to understand that the events of the day took place when the people were amassed together in their multitudes to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover; a time when the people present were not just there to look back and celebrate God's deliverance from the bondage that had enslaved their forefathers in Egypt, but also, and this is very important, they were looking **forward** to the fulfilment of the prophecies from scripture when a great & final liberation would be theirs through a Messiah King.

This king was to come and bring restoration to their beleaguered nation and free them from the oppression of the Roman occupiers.

Listen to this prophecy of Jeremiah from chapter 23:

*"The days **are coming**, declares the Lord, when **I will** raise up to David a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called:*

The Lord our Righteousness.

*So then the days **are coming** when people will no longer say, "As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt",but, instead, they will say, "As surely as the Lord lives, who brought **the descendents** of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them. Then they will live in their own land".*

By now, Jesus had become extremely well known; his amazing teaching, healing and miracles had created quite a stir and understandably, he'd gained a large following. News had spread broadly throughout the region that Jesus had even just **raised from the dead** a chap from Bethany, called Lazarus.

Surely, therefore, this man has power and authority; the likes of which we've never seen before???

So, could **this** be the Messiah King?

The excitement of the crowd was gathering momentum. They began chanting

from Psalm 118:

*“Blessed is **the King** who comes in the name of the Lord
Peace in heaven, glory in the highest”*

And look at his mode of transport! He’s on a donkey!

Keep those palm branches moving,

we’ve all heard the great 500-year-old prophesy from Zeccariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!

Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!

*See, **your King** comes to you,*

righteous and having salvation,

gentle and riding on a donkey...”

Alright, we’re not seeing much of his mighty army, but surely, at last, **this is the new king** who’s come to lead us in the revolt that’ll bring our promised freedom?

And..... they were absolutely right!

Jesus **had** come to bring freedom from oppression; to break the bonds of slavery; to bring light to a dark world; to offer hope to the hopeless; to establish a kingdom where peace prevailed; but it didn’t happen in the way they expected it to. The people didn’t get it.

As uncomfortable as he knew it had to be, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing..... and if we read on just a bit from our passage this morning, his distress is heart-breaking: as he approached Jerusalem, he **wept over it** and said,

“If you had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes”

Can you just imagine the fear and anguish he must have been going through at

this moment? And the temptation he must have been wrestling with just to make it all go away!!!

Here was God! The creator of each strand of hair on each head on each person who was about to administer to him the most extreme cruelty and brutality. One word from his lips and it could all have stopped. But he didn't; he remained obedient. He knew exactly why he'd come.

If we flip back from our passage in Luke 19 to chapter 18, he couldn't have made it any clearer:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them,

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be turned over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again"

Or, as Isaiah would have it:

"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

There had to be the atoning death; the great sacrifice. If he hadn't put himself on the cross in this way there would of course have been no resurrection and none of us would be here this morning because none of us would most likely ever have heard of a good teacher who lived 2000 years ago called Jesus. If there hadn't been a resurrection why on earth would anyone have bothered writing any of this down? And so there would be no salvation for us; no reconciliation with our divine Father; no eternal paradise. Death would be the end; that's it! There would be no hope.

On he went.....

snaking down the steep path from the Mount of Olives to the Temple in Jerusalem, through the crowds....

Still waving their palm branches and cheering.

Jesus knew that humankind needed to be left in no doubt exactly who he was and what he was about to accomplish.

So often in his ministry, Jesus was less willing to draw crowds. He'd often withdraw to the wilderness; he'd often ask people whom he'd healed not to tell anyone. Now though we see that all this has changed;

the reserve is gone. Jesus seems to desire the attention. He wants everyone to see him. It was for all of us that he was putting himself on the cross so it was essential for him to draw the attention of all of us to himself and to what was about to unfold. For this reason he chooses a time when the town and temple would be completely full to capacity. Of all the events in Jesus' ministry, his death was the most public and the one witnessed by the greatest number of Jews.

The choreography was perfect. Look at the detail if we just scratch the surface of this passage, we can see that there is a profound meaning not only in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but, more importantly, the manner of that entry into Jerusalem. There is a significance in each of the details which, when pieced together, give us an absolute confirmation of Jesus' divine identity. To expand on that a little: I can't find anywhere else in the Gospels where Jesus rode anything, anywhere! He walked. But here we are, throughout this passage, with a donkey playing a prominent role in the whole proceedings. If Jesus had planned his entry so very carefully, surely there must be some significance in this particular mode of transport?

Well, of course, there is as we've already heard in the great prophesy from Zeccariah. Incidentally, as a bit of an aside: I wonder if it's safe for us to consider the possibility that he'd made prior arrangements with the animal's owners? After all, the donkey was from Bethany and Jesus had been staying there for a week or so, leading up to these events so he would have had every opportunity.

I mean, *otherwise*, the owners asked them, "Why are you untying it"? They answer, "The Lord needs it" and that's enough!!!

Really???

I'm just wondering how I'd respond if a couple of chaps walked into my showroom and started walking out with a lawnmower, calling out in explanation that "The Lord needs it!", I think I'd at least like to see some I.D!!!

Not only do we have the prophetic king riding into town on a donkey in Zeccariah but also, another five-hundred years earlier again, so we're now a thousand years earlier - remember God's calendar's different to ours.....

it was Zadok the Priest who put Solomon on his father David's donkey and led him to Gihon, on the Western edge of the Kidron Valley, near to the same Mount of Olives where our action is unfolding. There, **Solomon** was anointed King amid cheering and shouting and with trumpets blasting so loudly, we read in 1 Kings 1 vs. 40, that the ground shook!

The crowd would have been familiar with these details from scripture so we get a picture of why they were getting so excited can't we? Luke goes on to tell us another detail that surely carries some significance? The business of the cloaks being thrown along the road and the disciples throwing their cloaks over the donkey's back for Jesus to sit on. We may assume this was a generous gesture to prevent Jesus from getting a sore backside, but, as it's noted in scripture at this critical point in human history, let's assume nothing of the sort! Instead, let's spend some time looking back in 1 and 2 Kings where we discover that the spreading of cloaks was an integral part of a **King's** inauguration ceremony. For example, when Jehu is anointed King in 2 Kings chapter 9 vs.13, we read,

"They hurried and took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, "Jehu is King"

So, we see, Jesus, in choosing to enter the city in the manner that he does, is making a very deliberate statement of who he is and what he's come to do. He's giving rise to an expectation that there is going to be a new Kingdom established which will be eternal, peaceful and universal, which is in stark contrast to what the people were having to endure at that moment; so it's with little wonder they were welcoming him into town in the manner of regal splendour.

However, not everyone was impressed. The Pharisees were in the crowd and were

muttering between themselves. They regarded Jesus' teaching as sacriligious and blasphemous and felt their religious authority was under threat. They certainly didn't want this uprising to lead to a revolt that would bring the Roman army down on them. As we know, of course, the disquiet grew, Jesus was arrested and the events take a dramatic turn which we'll hear more about as this coming week unfolds.

So, this Sunday the people were welcoming King Jesus in joyful adulation.

"Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord"

By Friday, the same voices will be shouting "crucify him".

They thought he was the eagerly-anticipated mighty warrior king who would save them from Roman oppression. In just a few days they see Jesus, being held by the Roman authorities, looking weak and vulnerable and they turn away and they decide that he's not the king they want after all.

Even his best friends will state in public that they don't know him. Following this guy seems dangerous. Perhaps, for now it's best to remain as we are. I don't want to get into trouble so I'll go with the flow. Maybe oppression's not so bad after all; I know we're slaves to the powers of this dark world but at least we're still breathing; I don't believe in this kingdom he speaks of where peace prevails, so our situation will have to remain hopeless – Go on and Crucify him! We'll just keep things as they are.

I wonder if it might be hypocritical for us to criticise the people for thinking such thoughts and behaving in such a way? To be fair they must have been terrified of the Roman army and they genuinely thought their salvation was at hand so I'm sure they would have been confused and disappointed and, crucially, they hadn't yet experienced the **ultimate** victory Jesus won for us on Easter Sunday so, as I say, they just didn't get it.

We, on the other hand, **have** the advantage of 2000 years of hindsight and, of course, the New Testament scriptures. Many of us are well familiar with the Gospels and the true and full extent of God's amazing love has been revealed to

us so, yes, with very good reason, we'll all be celebrating together on Easter Sunday next week. BUT.....

Even so, are we so **very** different from the crowd?

Are we clear about who **we're** worshipping?

For a while, the crowd were worshipping their King Jesus but he didn't appear to turn out anything like they had expected so they rejected him.

Does our faith falter when God doesn't deliver what we're expecting? Does our discipleship falter when we realize the cost and risks of following Jesus?

Do our self-serving instincts lead us to deny Jesus and his claim on our lives?

Let's end in prayer:

Heavenly Father,

We thank you so much for everything you did for us throughout this holy week. Thank you that we had a glimpse of your divine authority universally acknowledged on earth as you journeyed triumphantly towards Jerusalem with shouts of praise and acclamation.

Lord, we want to see so much more of that so we pray to you now that, as we journey through this Holy Week together, there will be a fresh outpouring of your Holy Spirit and that assurance of your divine sovereignty will become widespread in the places we inhabit and far beyond.

Father, we wave **our** palm branches and we lay down not just our

cloaks but our whole lives before you now and say thank you for what you had to endure for us.

In the name of Jesus, the King of glory,

Amen