

Luke 19:28-40 Sermon – Palm Sunday

The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday is one of the best-known parts of the gospel, and one we read and re-read every single year. And we do this because it is such an important narrative, marking the beginning of Holy Week – it's the decisive action which seems to set in motion the horrible events which follow over Easter weekend. It's an important narrative because of its religious implications as a claim that Jesus is the Jewish messiah and because of what it says about Jesus's kingship.

The whole narrative is great as an imaginative, prayerful exercise – where would you be in the crowds if you were there? Would you be one of the disciples shouting and making a public fuss about Jesus? Would you be one of the crowd generally, being caught up by the excitement and joining in, even if you aren't entirely sure what exactly is going on? Would you be one of the Pharisees, trying to keep order, avoid Roman attention to what is a highly political action and trying to ensure the theological space has been verified before any excitement can begin? Would you just have been a confused on-looker, or a Roman soldier threatened by this potential mini-uprising or confusing religious action? Where would you have been?

It is the shouting of the crowd and the reaction of the Pharisees that I want to touch on briefly in more detail now.

The disciples, it says, had seen deeds of power and were praising God for them. I suppose if we'd seen all that Jesus had done in the three years of his ministry, we'd have done the same. Maybe we would anyway? I guess we can ask ourselves that question at least.

What's interesting is the connection between seeing these deeds of power and the actual words they shouted:

'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

There's not an immediate connection – why call Jesus King? Why peace in heaven? What's going on here?

'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!' comes from Psalm 118. As is often the case in the New Testament, the Old Testament is a framework through which new events are interpreted. This Psalm's use, however, is really important. It's a Psalm about a King and his procession into a ritual ceremony of sacrifice. It moves from the King's arrival at the gate of the temple, his entry into the ceremonial area, and finally his arrival in front of the altar. And it is this arrival in front of the altar, the place of the imminent sacrifice, which is commemorated with the words 'Bless is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!'

Whether Jesus' followers were fully aware of it at the time or not, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is linked firmly with the King who arrives at the gates, just like Jesus is doing now, enters into a ritual ceremony and is announced just as the sacrifice is imminent. In this poetic way, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem becomes his Kingly presence at the altar of sacrifice, in preparation for Good Friday when

his blood would be shed for the sin of the people. This is a massive theological step, but one which the crowd were happy to shout about in response to all they had seen.

They shouted on, 'Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!' Here we are transported back to the angels on Christmas night singing to the shepherds. A new saviour of the people was born that day. Jesus is proclaimed by angels and now by his followers, as the saviour of the world, the Messiah who will save God's people and restore them to God bringing peace. We might say that this is old news, but here, the disciples are shunting it up against the Kingly presence at the altar. Jesus is the saviour who over this next week will be the king who is slain and whose blood will save the people.

This is a major political statement – a new King – and a major theological statement – a Messiah, a saviour, but also mixed up with sacrifice in a way no-one at the time could have understood and which only makes sense to us after the event. It's a statement which didn't get universal approval, hence the Pharisees in the crowd telling Jesus to control the excitement.

Their motivations traditionally get bad press but were probably mixed. They'd seen what happens to people when the Romans get a whiff of rebellion and the blood that flows in the aftermath. They'd seen false Messiahs come and go with all the disillusionment and religious upheaval that that causes. They'd also heard of this Jesus who had a tendency to give religious leaders a really rough ride and reinterpret teachings and ways of thinking which have held sway for centuries. There were plenty of reasons for wanting Jesus to keep his people quiet. It leads us to wonder, what reasons why might have for keeping our own faith quiet?

Jesus' answer to them is defiant. He will not tell his followers to be quiet, simply because he will be worshipped either way, by them or by the creation itself. We could unpack this for hours for the implications about Jesus' implied deity, the connections between Psalms including Psalm 19 where the creation itself declares God's glory, and the connections between all that we've talked of about the motivations of the Pharisees and Jesus' response. Instead, I just want to leave you with a final thought on it.

If Jesus' followers stopped following, if the whole of Jesus' church fell silent and even if all the church congregations dwindled to nothing and no-one worshipped Jesus any more, nothing would stop him being worshipped by creation itself. This refocuses our own thinking back onto the worship of Jesus. We come to church to worship Jesus. We live our lives midweek to worship Jesus and if and when we tell others about our faith, it is so they can also worship Jesus.

Our motivation for talking about our faith, or putting on missional events, is never 'so that more people come to church' – it's so that more people can worship Jesus. Our motivation is not 'so that the church does not close' or 'so that a cultural centre of our village is maintained' or so that we can 'encourage good and moral living', or any of these things. It's nothing to do with supporting an institution, paying a vicar, or looking after some heritage building and furnishings. Our motivation for talking amongst each other and with others is the enabling of worship of Jesus because worshipping Jesus is a privilege offered to us. God doesn't need our worship, Jesus doesn't need it – creation would take our place if we fell silent. We need to worship Jesus. It is the chief purpose of being human and one which Jesus would not take away from his disciples that day.

Palm Sunday shows us afresh the Jesus we worship, as the saviour of the world, come as king and Messiah to dash himself upon the altar of human sin to enable us to find our true selves in worship of him. Let us find ourselves in the places of those disciples, singing and shouting that privileged creed that we have met the King and he has saved us. Amen.