

Sermon 10 April 2022 Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

Jesus makes his triumphant entry onto Jerusalem. He comes as a hero, acclaimed and heralded by the crowds, a stark contrast to what will take place in a few days time. One aspect of Luke's account which differs from the other gospels is that there is no mention of palm branches or of hosannas. It could be that these were associated with parades and celebrations of a nationalistic nature and Luke didn't want that association. In Luke's account, the participants are seen as very much Jesus' followers and not random crowds. But there is no doubting their adulation of Jesus. Nor is there any doubt about the intent and message that Jesus gives in his journey into Jerusalem.

This was a well-planned journey. Jesus had already arranged for a donkey to be available for his use. Why a donkey? There are two reasons. Firstly, he is fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. *'Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey.'* Zechariah 9:9.

Secondly, it was a deliberate claim to be a king of a certain kind in that a donkey in Palestine was not the lowly animal we consider it today. It was noble, and most importantly, it denoted peace. Only in war did leaders ride on a horse. So by choosing a donkey Jesus was making a conscious and very firm statement that he was a king of love and peace, and not a conquering military hero whom the Israelites wanted and expected as their Messiah.

It was an act of great courage on the behalf of Jesus. He was a wanted man. The Jewish leaders were looking to accost and apprehend him, and yet there he, large as life, making a very public and bold entry into Jerusalem. He is throwing down the gauntlet to the religious leaders.

Then in Luke's account we don't have the strewing of palms in front of Jesus, but we do have the laying down of cloaks on the road in front of him and the singing from the great psalm of praise (Psalm 118) that pilgrims always sang on the way to Jerusalem.

It is a scene of immense jubilation and celebration, and Jesus himself captures the mood and the spirit of the occasion so beautifully in that last verse, when in response to the Pharisees telling him to put a dampener on his followers' enthusiasm, he says, *'If they kept quiet, the stones themselves would burst into cheers.'* I just love that imagery. Stone is the absolute antithesis to cheerfulness. When we talk about a stony look or stare, we mean cold, unfriendly, frosty. So to have stones bursting into cheers really does emphasise so vividly the immense joy and elation of Jesus' followers. Jesus had a knack of using simple images to make vivid and graphic points.

One of the interesting aspects of Holy Week is how the people turned from a hero-worshipping crowd on Palm Sunday into a mob baying for the blood of Jesus later in the week. But that is human nature, isn't it? We all have our good side but we do have our not so good side. The challenge is to, at all times, practise unconditional love as prescribed by Christ. That means treating everyone, no matter who they are, with the same respect and consideration.

There is the story of seven monks who many, many years ago were in a cave in a jungle somewhere in Asia meditating on this issue of unconditional love. There was the head monk, his brother and his best friend. The fourth was the head monk's enemy – they just couldn't get along. The fifth monk was a very old monk and his years were numbered. The sixth monk was sick – so sick that he also could die at any time. And the last monk, the seventh monk, was the useless monk. Always late; couldn't remember just what he was supposed to be doing. But the other tolerated him and thanked him for teaching them patience.

One day a gang of bandits discovered the cave. They wanted to take it over for their base and so they decided to kill all the monks. The head monk, fortunately, was a very persuasive speaker. He managed to persuade the bandits to let all the monks go, except for one, who would be killed as a warning to the other monks not to let anyone know the location of the cave. That was the best deal the head monk could wrangle from the bandits. There was one condition – he could not choose himself as the one to be killed.

The head monk was left alone for a few minutes to make the awful decision. So the question is – whom do you think he chose? The monk who was his enemy? – wrong. The useless monk? – wrong. The old or the sick monk? – wrong. And it wasn't his brother or his best friend. He actually wasn't able to choose because he loved them all equally. Whether they were his brother or useless, his best friend or close to death, he loved them equally. That is what unconditional love is. It is very hard!

Now the story doesn't actually relate what happened when the head monk told the bandits he couldn't choose. But I know what happened – the bandits were so impressed and inspired by this living example of unconditional love that they not only let all the monks live, but they became monks themselves!

Going back to the crowds in the events of Holy Week. We see the good side and the bad. We see human nature at its best and at its worst. The challenge for us is to ensure the good side prevails.

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