

Sermon Palm Sunday 2023

On Palm Sunday Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the acclaim and adulation of the crowds. They claim him as King. A few days later they turn on him, but then later, following his death and resurrection, he is reclaimed as King. If nothing else, a very good reflection of the fickle nature of humans.

It was Passover time and Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims. They had come from near and far. Jesus could not have chosen a more dramatic time to make a statement – it was a city surging with people and what's more, the reason they were there was a religious reason. A very clever piece of planning!

The crowds received Jesus like a King. They spread their cloaks before him. They cut down and waved palm branches. They shouted 'Hosanna,' which is a cry of adoration. In this case, it was a cry of hope from an oppressed people living under Roman rule and it means, 'Save us now.' They had been waiting generations for the Messiah and he was finally here! Just a week later, Jesus would save them, but not in a way they would have imagined.

This event shows us three things about Jesus. It shows us his courage. Jesus knew what lay ahead of him. He knew the authorities were out to get him, but he wasn't ducking for cover, and in fact, quite the contrary. He knew it was time to bring it to a head.

It shows us his claim to be the Messiah. By riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, he was fulfilling the prophecy made by Zechariah, and I quote from Zechariah 9:9. *'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.'* He was making a statement, confirming what he had been saying all along – 'I am God's anointed one.'

And thirdly, it shows us his wide appeal. There was so much about Jesus that attracted people to him – what he said, how he said it, what he did, his mana, his personality. Throughout his short ministry Jesus continually drew crowds of people. His ride into Jerusalem was a vivid demonstration of this. It wasn't just numbers, it was how they responded to him. It was overt hero worship. He was a rock star!

Two thousand years later we continue to worship Jesus. But, and here I get to the point I really want to make, this praise and worship is meaningless if we fail to take on board the lessons he provides us with. What's the point of putting someone on a pedestal if we don't learn from them?

Jesus has certain expectations of us. What are those expectations? Very simply, to have faith in God, and to practise that faith through worship and caring for others. I want to emphasise that second point. If we dutifully attend church every Sunday but throughout the week we fail to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of others, then our relationship with God will falter. In fact, I would go so far as to say that worship becomes meaningless.

There is the wonderful and well-known story of the monk who was kneeling alone in his cold, bare cell, praying fervently. As the noon hour approached, the cell was suddenly filled with a bright glow. Lifting his eyes, the monk had a vision. He saw Christ walking through village streets and fields, healing the sick, blessing little children, and preaching the word of God to the crowds.

The monk gazed at the vision in awe, feeling so pleased that the good Lord should show himself to his humble servant in this way. But suddenly his joy was interrupted by a familiar sound. The chapel bell began to clang loudly, calling him to leave his cell and do his daily work. For now it was the appointed hour when the poor and the elderly gathered outside the monastery gates. There they received a daily portion of

bread, which the brothers baked especially for the needy. And it was this monk's duty each day to distribute the bread.

The monk was filled with sorrow and doubt. What should he do? How could he turn his back on this magnificent vision? How could he desert this incredible vision for a group of beggars outside the gate? Surely they could wait. But the thought of the poor people waiting at the gates wouldn't leave the monk's mind. A battle was taking place within his soul between the ecstasy of the vision and the plight of those who waited outside.

But deep down the monk knew what he must do. Reluctantly, he rose to his feet and taking one last longing look at the vision, he left his cell and hurried out to feed the poor. There were so many to feed and the monk thought he would never finish. He was desperate to return to his cell, so hoping that the vision would still be there.

At last, after a long hour, his work was done. He hurried down the long hallway to his room, threw open the door, and stopped on the threshold with an awestruck gasp. The radiant vision was still there. He sank to his knees with joy and as he did so, the vision spoke, 'If you had stayed, I would have left.'

The monk knew he had made the right decision when he left to help his needy brothers and sisters.

We practise our faith through what we do for others. This is what God expects from us. And right now that could not be more appropriate and relevant. It is interesting that the decline in faith in the Western world in recent years has been accompanied by a focus on the welfare, not of others but of self.

But let's just focus on our own back yard, on what we can each do for those in our immediate community. If nothing else, just get on that phone and let someone know that you care about them. You will make their day, and you will make God's day too.

Let me finish with a short prayer. Lord Jesus, on Palm Sunday you made a huge statement as to just who you really are. Help us to take that on board and to give that credence and validity through what we do for others. You come as a king but you also come to serve, and it is in serving others that we consolidate our relationship with you and with our community. Amen.

Rev Warner Wilder