

Sermon 24 March 2024 Palm Sunday

Jesus rides triumphantly into Jerusalem. The beginning of a momentous week, the beginning of what we now call Holy Week. The beginning of the events leading up to the terrible crucifixion of Jesus, but also the glorious resurrection of Jesus, the event which is primarily responsible for the creation and existence of our Christian religion. And in some ways, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem mirrors the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. They are both journeys of triumph, a time when Jesus is recognised and proclaimed as King.

This was a well-planned journey. Jesus has already arranged for a donkey to be available for his use. Why a donkey? Firstly, he is fulfilling a 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 aim to be a king of a certain kind in that a donkey in Palestine was not the lowly animal we consider it to be today. It was noble and 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 as a king of love and peace, and not a conquering military hero whom the Israelites wanted and expected from their Messiah.

There is another aspect to this point. The donkey, albeit being considered to be noble, is a beast of burden that speaks of service. We know that Jesus' brand of leadership was servant leadership. That was emphasised in his gesture of washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, which we will be celebrating in our Washing of the Feet service on Thursday evening. So, by riding on a donkey he is mocking the Roman military leaders riding on their horses. He is contrasting his style of leadership with the sort of leadership the Jews expected from their Messiah. You could say that he was engaging in very effective street theatre.

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 very much the nature of the human disposition, isn't it? We all have our good sides but at times the not so good side invariably surfaces.

I do need to make the point that the crowd hailing Jesus on Palm Sunday and the crowd baying for his blood a few days later were probably not quite the same crowd. However, it does serve to highlight the fact that human nature has a variety of shades, oscillating between the light and the dark.

You might be familiar with the story of the two men, both seriously ill, in the same room in a hospital. There was only one small window looking out onto the world outside. One of the men had his bed next to the window and once a day he was manoeuvred by the nurses so that he could sit up and look out of the window. But the other man had to spend his time flat on his back and had no access to the window.

Every afternoon, when the man next to the window was propped up in bed for an hour, he would pass the time describing to his roommate what he could see outside. From what he described, the window apparently overlooked a park where there was a lake. There were ducks and swans in the lake, and children came to throw them bread and to sail model boats. Young lovers walked hand in hand beneath the trees, and there were flowers and games of softball. And at the back, behind a ring of trees, was a fine view of the city skyline.

All this the man patiently described to his roommate to lift his spirits. He told how a child nearly fell into the lake, and how lovely the girls looked in their summer dresses. His roommate could almost feel he was

there in the park. Then one afternoon, a dark thought came to him. Why should the man next to the window have all the pleasure of seeing what was going on outside? Why shouldn't he get a chance? It wasn't fair. He tried to stifle such thoughts, but each day they became stronger. His jealousy grew, his soul soured. Something had to change.

Well, one night as he lay there with his thoughts, staring at the ceiling, the other man suddenly woke up with a start. He coughed and choked and tried to grope for the button that would summon the nurse, but he wasn't able to grasp it. The other man watched. He could have pressed the button but some dark invisible force stopped him. The next morning the nurse came in and found that the man had died. The next day, the other man asked if he could be switched to the bed next to the window. So they moved him.

As soon as they had left, he laboriously propped himself up on one elbow and looked out the window. It faced a blank wall.

One man brought a ray of sunshine into another man's world. One man was somewhat more selfish. This contrast in attitude and character was exemplified in the contrast between the crowd on Palm Sunday and the crowd later in the week. Where do we fit in? I am sure it would be with the Palm Sunday crowd but we are human and there will be times when perhaps we can be found siding with those, who in their ignorance, or perhaps just caught up in the moment, make a misguided call.

What gives us optimism is that light will always conquer darkness. You turn on the light in the dark, the darkness disappears. Love will always conquer hate. Easter Sunday is a perfect illustration of this.

Jesus said of himself, *'I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.'* John 8:12. What does that mean for us?

Firstly, on a purely personal level, not only do we receive a sense of comfort and strength in dealing with the challenges of life, but also there is an inherent sense of living our lives in such a way that we can ourselves be something of a light for others. There is absolutely no doubt that if we can, in our very limited and very human way, reflect something of Christ's life in our lives, then that will have some sort of influence on others.

Someone said, *'Be the light that helps others find their way.'* Some time ago, I was talking to someone about a mutual acquaintance and they were saying how inspired they were by this person's values and faith. I couldn't help thinking at the time that therein lies both a wonderful lesson and a challenge for us all. Yes, we can touch people's lives through service but we can also touch people's lives just through being who we are. There is that well-known quote from Albert Einstein, *'Setting an example is not the main means of influencing people, it is the only means.'*

I conclude with this observation – it is through striving to be an example, a light for others, that we create a pathway, a mode of living and interaction with others for ourselves. Author Mary Anne Radmacher wrote, *'As we work to create light for others, we naturally light our own way.'* The last word is from Jesus, as quoted a moment ago, *'If you follow me.....you will have the light that leads to life.'* The crowd on Palm Sunday saw that light; a week later that light was revealed to us, but we will address that next Sunday!