

05.04.20

Palm Sunday Sermon

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we consider this wonderful story of how you entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, may we travel with you and understand more of your call to follow you, on the way of the cross today. **Amen.**

Good morning everyone- how good to see you all. Today I will use a number of images as part of my sermon and I'm grateful to Hester for technical help with this, and to Richard Hird for generously sharing his photos of present day Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, centre of the ancient world, goal and joy of pilgrims, holy city.

It's a rough road down from Jericho to Jerusalem, approaching the great city from the East.

Jesus told a story about a man travelling on that road who was robbed, then rescued by the famous good Samaritan.

Today's pilgrims approach Jerusalem with much the same view, and as we trace Jesus' journey today, we find him in Bethphage, the village on the steep hill known as the Mount of Olives, about a mile away, across the Kidron Valley, from the city itself.

Matthew, whose gospel we follow all this year and especially this week, through Holy Week, is at pains to point out that these events were all part of the fulfilment of a number of Jewish prophecies.

In our reading today he first alludes to two, from Isaiah chapter 62 and Zechariah chapter 9.

Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

This carefully staged procession, with the donkey and the colt, down into the valley then up to the city walls, would have connected with the local people who had heard these prophecies read and taught in the synagogue. The manner of Jesus' coming raises questions straightaway : is he just a northern prophet or is he, could he possibly be, the Messiah, the long-awaited King of the Jews? So they join in themselves, laying their cloaks and palm branches at the donkey's feet and with loud cries of 'Hosanna!' 'Come and Save us!'

Had we received our readings sheet in church today, we would have been reading Psalm 118, which was always sung at Passover, that is, at the time when Jesus was arriving in Jerusalem with many other visitors, for the Passover feast.

Psalm 118 contains two particularly memorable verses:

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter and give thanks to God.

As Jesus approached the gate of the city, this psalm may well have been sung, or at least remembered, by many in that crowd.

Our own experience of Durham can help us imagine the sense of entering a fortified city, going up to the temple as we go up to the cathedral. And of course we have our gates too, in the street and place names we still use – Gilesgate, Crossgate, Millburngate....

Secondly, Psalm 118 says this: *the stone which the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone*

This prophecy will be fulfilled in the coming days as Jesus is rejected, betrayed, deserted and killed, only to rise again. How much more striking the architectural imagery in the setting of Jerusalem, with her huge city walls.

And what of this ancient story today? For this is no ordinary Palm Sunday, not least here in Brancepeth where we weren't able to gather in the village and follow the cross down to the church. How brilliant to have that opening walk within the castle instead- thank you Alison and Ulli.

But it's a Palm Sunday like no other because we sense the threat of COVID 19 drawing ever closer, like the enemies closing in on Jesus. We hear the rumours, and long for truth. We see the despair and long for hope. We feel the isolation, and long for love. We need the Messiah to come and save us: *Hosanna to the Son of David*.

The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley, as Robbie Burns put it.

The great American novelist John Steinbeck picked up on that phrase in his novel of the Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men*, and so might we in these exceptional days.

Our schemes, our plans in every area of our lives are as nothing in the face of this crisis.

The loss of control we feel as a result is crippling for many people, whether or not our physical health is threatened.

Yet this Palm Sunday we see that Jesus, caught in the grip of plots and violence, facing the powers of his own nation and of Rome, walks confidently in the plans of God. He arranges the very detail of the donkey and her colt, just as he will arrange the detail on Thursday of his last supper with his friends. He lives in the present, lives out the promises of God, and lives with us today. How we need him to come and save us from the fear which paralyses, the despair which drags us down, the isolation which robs us of his peace. *Hosanna to the Son of David*.

But this isn't just about our personal salvation and wellbeing. We the church are the eyes and ears, hands and feet of Jesus today. As we receive his presence and love each day, and especially through this service, may we be willing to share it with others, in prayer for individuals, situations, nations, and our whole world. To share Christ's love in the way we share our time and resources with the weakest and poorest, just as Jesus did. To demonstrate Christ's love as we mark this coming week, not with the disappointment of cancelled festivities, but with an even stronger proclamation that, love is stronger than hatred and life is stronger than death, because Jesus has died to rescue us and all the world, and lives again, for ever.

May we reach next Sunday convinced of his victory and living in its power, to his glory.

I'd like to close with a reflection about the other central character in today's story- the donkey. It's a poem by Janet Lees, and I've added a short prayer too. I will read it slowly and then we will keep silence for a few moments.



Closing Reflection: Donkey Day

Janet Lees, from *Let Justice Roll Down* ed. Geoffrey Duncan. Norwich, Canterbury Press 2003

Cross-marked beast
bearing cross-marked Christ,
what is your message today
as you travel the palm-strewn way?

Stumbling on a stony track,
people's coats on your back,
you were chosen for faithfulness.

This is a calling we share,
as the cross-marked hill
comes closer still.
your job is to carry him today,
yesterday's weight forgotten;
tomorrow's burden still uncertain.

May we, his cross-marked people,
bear him just as faithfully.

Lord, grant us strength and love to bear Christ, with and for others, this week. Amen.