

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY OF THE PASSION – PALM SUNDAY – YEAR B

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When Jesus of Nazareth, the wandering Jewish rabbi entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover in around 30AD with his rag-tag group of disciples, he set off a chain of events that would change the course of human history. As Jesus and his entourage entered the Holy City, they would have encountered pilgrims on the road to the festival, singing songs of the season. One of the songs they sang was Psalm 118, which included the line, "Hosanna!" which is not a cry of joy, but actually means, "Lord, save us!" After living for years under a repressive regime, they were looking for a deliverer, and they saw a possible saviour in the person of Jesus. As they lay their palm branches and cloaks on the ground before him, perhaps they thought that this itinerant preacher would preach a message of revolution and lead an army to throw out the hated Romans.

However, only a few days later, the crowd were calling out 'Crucify Him', 'Crucify Him'. What had changed? Perhaps Jesus demanded something that the crowd wasn't willing to give. The people wanted revolution, but Jesus demanded something more costly: a complete change of attitude toward life. Enemies were to be loved, not hated. God demanded not token sacrifice a few times a year, but total commitment every day. Jesus declared that what was important in life was loving God with all one's heart, soul, strength, and mind, as well as loving your neighbour. Jesus told people that the greatest loyalty in our life was to God, not to the Caesars who demand our obedience.

And so Jesus had to be got rid of. Because he threatened the powerful and the great. His arrival in Jerusalem was confronting to those who wanted to keep the Roman content and their own places of power and privilege intact.

If Jesus did want to keep everyone happy and not to make a fuss, he certainly went about it in completely the wrong way. Jesus' entry, mounted on a colt, was a dramatic way to convey his status: he is riding a king's mount. In those times, it was usual for a king to have a horse that no one else had ever ridden, and no one else would ever ride.

Mark states that "Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields." In Matthew they cut off branches from the trees, while it is only in John's gospel that palm branches are mentioned, while Luke doesn't mention branches of any kind.

It has been suggested by some Biblical historians that what all four evangelists don't mention is that while Jesus is parading in on a colt through one of the back entries into Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate would have been parading in on the other side of the city on a war horse accompanied by a squadron or two of battle-hardened Roman soldiers. You can bet that he too is being acclaimed by a crowd. There would have been trouble if the people of Jerusalem hadn't.

And so Jesus' entry into Jerusalem could have been seen by the crowds as a form of protest against Roman occupation. The crowd is walking a fine line here, because any overt suggestion that Jesus intends to assume kingly powers would be met by quick and decisive action by the Romans. This is emphasised by the crowds shouting, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" One expectation of the Jewish Messiah would be that he would be a descendant of the great warrior king, David, who would liberate the people of Israel from their oppressors, who at this point in history was the Roman Empire.

This could be one way of explaining why only five days later, Jesus dies an excruciating death by crucifixion by the Romans at the behest of the religious leadership in Jerusalem. There seems little doubt that Jesus of Nazareth, the wandering Galilean preacher, posed a threat to the status quo in Jerusalem. For the religious leadership, he posed a threat to their fragile position of privilege and wealth. If the Romans were to get upset by this wandering preacher and his rag-tag group of followers, they could lose everything. And for the Romans, Jesus posed a threat to the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, which often frayed at the edges, and Judea was the most Eastern part of their Empire in the early 30s AD, and they did not want a scruffy group of Jewish rebels leading a local revolt against their authority and rule.

Throughout his ministry Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, gave hope to those without it, and faith to those in despair.

But he also riled the powers-that-be of his day. Not only was he a caring rabbi and leader to his followers, but he was also a fiery prophet, who didn't hesitate challenging the status quo.

And so it should be for us too. There's a time in which we need to speak words of encouragement and hope to those who are hurting, and there's a time in which we need to be willing to confront the evils of this world and to speak the truth in love, even when it hurts, and even when it costs us dearly.