

Sermon 13 April 2014
Ps 118:1-2, 19-29 Mt 21¹⁻¹¹ 'Palm Sunday'

Prayer: O God, as we journey in life and encounter times of loneliness, doubt, and turmoil may we be reminded to entrust ourselves to your unfailing love. Grant us discernment about when to protect ourselves and when to make ourselves vulnerable. Empower us as communities of faith to witness in word and deed to your steadfast, never-failing, liberating, and transforming love.

Today is the beginning of Holy Week – a journey for Christians around the world as we approach Easter Sunday with its life bursting news that God so loves – you and me, so wants your friendship, attention, love, presence that nothing – not even death will stop him.

BUT before we get there we have to journey through Holy Week with Jesus as he went to 'celebrate' Passover in Jerusalem. As he squared UP and faced whatever was going to happen including the very real possibility of his death by torture, betrayal, pain..... Jesus chose not to avoid, run, hide, lie, + all those human characteristics that we use to protect ourselves *and are not so proud* of admitting to knowing about first hand! Jesus kept riding and isn't that a point of awe, for most – all ? of us?

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday – and you have in hand a Palm Sunday Cross – I'd like to offer a short video from the Skitguys about Palm Sunday... Listen hard because their dialogue is good – but fast!

Show Video: (3:30 mins in length)

The road to the cross is now our journey – and the invitation is to cover this road with all of our heart, soul and mind as we reflect on the final week of Jesus life – before we can arrive on Easter Sunday morning with the Good News of life and love made real and the world forever changed. I've had this quote stuck in my mind for several weeks now – and I began to give up on when I was to use it! But actually,,, in the way God has – I think this is as good as any :-). Madeleine L'Engle was a 20th Century American writer, best known for her young-adult fiction – Madeline was once asked 'Do you believe in God without any doubts? She replied: "I believe in God with all my doubts."

"I believe in God **with** all my doubts" leaves a lot of space for exploring, questioning, arguing, listening, discussing.... Lots of room to say that whatever you might be thinking / wondering about the whole '**Easter', thing**; Jesus' Cross – dying/ rising ... thing – whatever doubts about it all **the world was forever** changed by this coming weekend. This change began the moment Jesus was born, because Matthew tells us the news of Jesus birth disturbed / troubled / agitate caused turmoil for Jerusalem and the people in power. Mt 2:3 "**3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

And now as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, Matthew tells us the whole city 'was stirred' moved / uproar / shaken... in turmoil. (seasons) Matthew actually uses the word for earthquake. The Earth itself reflects the significance Jesus presence, life and death of what has happened: the curtain is torn, the temple is split in two, Earth shakes and rocks are split. The foundations have been fractured. The whole Earth protests. The impact of this 'Jesus' event in Jerusalem, is felt around the world and **by** the world.

Barbara Brown-Taylor puts it this way (*Gospel Medicine*): "the world was a different place, and the world knew it. The earth shook. Rocks split. Tombs groaned and fell open to the light....God [became] flesh and blood in order to bring divine love to life....'Here,' God said with the gift of a son – the one thing God had to give that was more precious to [God] than [God]self. 'You don't have to come to me where I am anymore. I will come all the way to you where you are, through this beloved child'. Doesn't this sound like the stories of Jesus, who spoke of a widow pulling her home apart to find a lost coin, or a shepherd going in search of a lost sheep? God comes to find us where we are."

Easter is about God coming to find us where we are, and this on Sunday every year we are called on to remember how God in Jesus determinedly rode in Jerusalem on a donkey; the people following him waved palm branches; covered the road in his honour and the city is stirred up to ask – who is this?

One of the reoccurring themes this Lent has been how we grow our faith by learning to see the layers of meaning Jesus packed into his teachings. The scriptures of this week are crammed full of layered meanings. The video reminded us about the historical meaning of palm branches to symbolised victory. Clearly his followers were anticipating a different outcome to Jesus and his disciples! Remember Thomas's comment last week? For Thomas simply returning to Judea for Lazarus's sake was signing their death warrants, goodness only knows what they said about going into Jerusalem!

While we need to be taught, they would have known that as they all came in the east gate (closest gate to Bethphage) with Jesus on the donkey, a good example of the **might** and **power** of the Roman army was busy marching in the west gate, to control the huge influx of Passover attendees. Conservative estimates suggest the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50 000 to over 200 000 (JA Swanson). It doesn't take that much for us to realise how 'Rome' might be feeling on edge at Passover time. The celebration of a people's liberation / freedom from the dominant world power! CV

Or as we saw in the video earlier when they highlighted the significance of Jesus on a donkey to defining his kingship model. The Biblical quotes Matthew uses tell us the kind of King / power / authority, Jesus accepted being associated with. It is here that Matthew, for the first time, directly associates Jesus as king.

It is true that Matthew told us in Jesus birth narratives that the magi were looking for the "king of the Jews" in 2:3, but here the association is more explicit. Jesus is treated as a royal figure, given their version of the red carpet treatment. But it is not a triumphant / military victorious kingly model, rather one modelled on humbleness and meekness. (JA Swanson) I had pointed out for me this year that there is another kingly echo in this narrative most of our Bible 'Versions' don't have. In the original KJV vs 7 says: "And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, **and they set him** thereon ." **He** doesn't get on the donkey. He is "sat" on it by others and treated as a King should be.

So when the Jerusalem crowd ask: "Who is he?" The words say 'prophet' but the picture right before their eyes tells them the answer is 'a "king" on a donkey'. And Jesus rides straight on in, accepting this model with all the layers of challenge and confrontation beneath the surface. Yes a meek, humble king – yes one who rides straight on in with full acceptance of all the consequences. (JVanDeLaar) "Rather than avoid the confrontation and its consequences, Jesus faces them square on, and refuses to shy away from the potential suffering, or change his message or methods in order to stay safe. In a world in which pain-avoidance has become almost a religion in itself, this role-model is deeply challenging – as is the cause of Jesus' pain: his insistence on living according to God's alternative way and his refusal to bend to the demands or threats of empire and its systems.

J Van de Laar says: "We each face, every day, the temptation to just be part of the system. We must choose every day whether we will turn from the sacrifices of challenging the status quo, or "get on the donkey" and face the confrontations. And each day we do this in some surprising ways. When we refuse to play God in the lives of our children, friends or companions, we reject the ways of Empire. When we reject the call to accumulate as much as we can, and embrace a life of simplicity and generosity, we undermine the influence of Empire in our word. When we commit to peace and justice, even at the cost of our own safety or lives, we have turned our back on Empire. When we take the time to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of those on the fringes of the system, we have undermined the exclusionary rules of Empire. Living like this will seldom win us any awards or lead us into positions of power and wealth, but it will win us the inner joy and peace that comes from living in God's reign, and it will lead us to integrity, wholeness, and the wealth of love and being loved that Jesus demonstrated so well." It will allow our lives more than just our words to tell how God came to find us and why.

A last Lenten challenge: Will you continue to journey with Jesus, get on the donkey and ride with him?
Amen