

Ezekiel 43:1-5

1 Then the man brought me to the gate facing east,
2 and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.
3 The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the River Kebar, and I fell face down.
4 The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east.
5 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

Matthew 21:1-11

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,
2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.
3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."
4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:
5 "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"
6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.
7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on.
8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"
11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Palm Sunday

Ezekiel 43:1-5; Matthew 21:1-11

Sometimes you come to a subject like Palm Sunday and realise you've spoken on it before, so you need to seek inspiration, and to come at it from a different direction. This time I struggled until I started to think about the old city of Jerusalem, and landed upon the subject of gates. In my own limited experience you can come into the old city from numerous directions, but in each case you approach through one of 8 gates. Jaffa, New, Damascus, Herod's, Lion's, Golden, Dung, Zion. One day we went in through the Damascus gate and were completely stuck in a massive crowd and had to be sprayed with water to cool us all down.

In this case, as Jesus was coming from Bethphage, and down the mount of Olives, he would have come through the Golden Gate, known also as the East Gate or the Beautiful Gate. It's the oldest gate in the city, and it was sealed up by the muslims in 810AD, reopened by the Crusaders in 1102, and closed again by Saladin in 1187. It was rebuilt and resealed by the Sultan Suleiman in 1541 and has stayed that way since. He also put a cemetery outside to prevent Jesus from gaining further access! But it's continued to be a flashpoint, and Israeli authorities sealed the area off in 2003 because the group managing it had ties to Hamas.

In latest news, part of the interior was reopened just a year ago, in Feb 2019, for use by Palestinians at the Al Aqsa mosque.

So as soon as you investigate the history it becomes apparent that this is the most significant gate in Jerusalem, not least because of two prophecies by Ezekiel, the first of which we heard, where the prophet, in a vision, saw the glory of God enter the temple through the gate, and fill the temple.

The second prophecy in Ezekiel 44, says this:

2 The Lord said to me, 'This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered through it. 3 The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the Lord.

And so the tradition became fixed in Jewish culture that the Messiah would enter through this gate. Of course this was fulfilled as far as Christians are concerned, but no other religion places Jesus as central to world history.

We have to make our own minds up.

Personally I find the scriptures to be very strongly in favour of the prophetic vision of Ezekiel at the expense of the more fact and statistic based scientific obsession of 21st century thinking.

Why otherwise is this gate such a centre of attention?

I think it will continue to be the case, mainly because it's a popular route for Muslims attending the Dome of the rock.

The Temple Mount, where the mosques now stand, is of course of crucial importance to Jews, who are allowed to visit but not to pray there.

On Palm Sunday, the significance of what Jesus did stirred up the passions on both sides of the argument. The people wanted a King like David, and they thought they'd got one, and celebrated wildly, as we do today. The symbolism of coming through the East Gate was not lost on anyone, especially riding on a donkey, like King David himself did. It was prophesied of course *Zech 9:9 says this "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."*

But Jesus knows he comes to Jerusalem to die.

A different sort of King.

He's told the disciples a number of times but they're pretty much in denial. *Mt 16:21... Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ...and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

And the authorities, unlike the crowds, are furious, especially as the first thing Jesus does on arrival is to drive out the moneychangers from the temple. But look at verse 10 *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was **stirred** and asked, "Who is this?"*

The Greek word here translated as 'stirred' is *eseisthe*.

In Matthew 27:51, on the death of Jesus, this word is translated as a physical earthquake. Maybe the importance of the Palm Sunday event is underestimated by the translators!

Maybe Matthew wants to suggest that the Holy City is shaken to its foundations by the arrival of God's anointed?

Especially as he uses the same word in 4 other places, the last one being another earthquake when the angel opens the tomb on Easter morning. (Mt 8:24, 24:7, 27:54, 28:2).

What we know was that the people wanted a King.

And they wanted a prophet, as long as he didn't denounce them.

Going on through Matthew's account we find Jesus denouncing the religious hierarchy in chapter 23. Seven woes. Here's one of them: *15 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*

Read on to Matthew 24 and he speaks to the disciples:

4... 'Watch out that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Messiah," and will deceive many.

We want to be rescued, but not often in a way that hurts or causes us to change our lives. False prophets, some within the christian church, promise much but do not require surrender to Christ. The rescue, the salvation Jesus gives goes deeper than we really want because he gives us everything, but in return we have to be prepared to lay down our lives for Him.

And so as He said, once we have put our hand to the plough – once we have committed ourselves fully to Him – there is no turning back.

This is a hard thing. There are several instances in the gospels when disciples found his teaching too hard, and turned away. *John 6:63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe."... 66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.*

If you truly follow Jesus, your life will never be the same, but at the same time, you will never regret it.

I don't think life will be the same after the pandemic. I think God is challenging us through this situation, not just as a church, but as a nation, as nations. Whether we learn the lessons and make our society better and more just and equitable for everyone or whether pandemic laws are used to move us into some sort of global police state remains to be seen. Our message *must* be the Good News that the only way forward is to follow Jesus, as the single voice that can be trusted, because it is He who brings healing and wholeness, and He who sets free the captives. For the moment we have all been made captive. The challenge, as Pope Francis said, is *for us to judge, to choose what matters and what passes away*. There are many aspects of the society we have built which will pass away. The words of Jesus will never pass away. The time to turn back to God is now. Amen.