

Psalm 118:19-29

19 Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
20 This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.
21 I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.
22 The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
23 the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.
24 The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.
25 Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.
27 The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.
28 You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.
29 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever.

Luke 19:28-40

28 ...Jesus... went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.
29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,
30 'Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.
31 If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" say, "The Lord needs it."
32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them.
33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?'
34 They replied, 'The Lord needs it.'
35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it.
36 As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.
37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:
38 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'
39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!'
40 'I tell you,' he replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'

Hosanna!

Psalm 118:19-29; Luke 19:28-40

I've somehow been landed with preaching on this for the third time in four years and I was running out of ideas, however I don't think, judging by the Facebook statistics, that many people heard the 2020 one so I'm using some of it again. The prophecy we heard from Psalm 118 mentions *the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter*, and so I want to start with that aspect of Palm Sunday. You can come into the old city of Jerusalem from numerous directions, but in each case you approach through one of 8 gates. The Jaffa gate, the New gate, the Damascus gate, Herod's gate, the Lion's gate, the Golden gate, the Dung gate (I won't go into how that one got its name!), the Zion gate. In this case, as Jesus was coming from Bethphage, and down the mount of Olives, he would have come through the Golden Gate, also known as the East Gate or the Beautiful Gate. It's the oldest gate in the city, and has a chequered history. It was sealed up by muslims in 810, reopened by the Crusaders in 1102, closed again by Saladin in 1187, and rebuilt and resealed by Suleiman in 1541 and it's stayed shut ever since. Suleiman also put a cemetery right in front of it, maybe to prevent Jesus from getting in again! 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.

Part of the interior of it was reopened just 3 years ago, in 2019, for use by Palestinians going to the Al Aqsa mosque. So as soon as you investigate you can see that this is the most significant gate in Jerusalem, not least because of two Old Testament prophecies by Ezekiel, in the first of which, in a vision, he saw the glory of God enter 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; ... 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, and as far as Christians are concerned this was fulfilled on Palm Sunday. No one else believes Jesus is so central to world history, which explains why the Beautiful gate is such a bone of contention. And I think it'll continue to be the case, mainly because it's a popular route for Palestinian Muslims attending the mosque, which is ironic considering the fact that it's Muslims who have been largely responsible for keeping it closed. The Temple Mount, where the two 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. The symbolism of coming through the Beautiful Gate was not lost on anyone, especially if you were riding on a donkey, like King David himself. It was prophesied in Zechariah 9:9 which says this:

"Rejoice greatly Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

It starts as a prophecy of judgement but in verse 10 it says *He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River Euphrates to the ends of the earth*

So this act was Jesus's statement to those who knew the symbolism of it that it was the return of the King to the city. Not King David but a different sort of King, and he'd arrived *in peace* and to *bring peace*. To the temple hierarchy who were looking for excuses to arrest him, it was a blatant provocation. Underlined by the fact that the next day he was overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. At other times Jesus had been keen to keep a low profile – he would often say *tell no one about this miracle*. Now he was front page news. And He knew he'd come to Jerusalem to die. *Luke 18:31 Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We're going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. 32 He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; 33 they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.'*

34 The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

The authorities, unlike the crowds, were furious, especially as the first thing Jesus did after his arrival was to drive out the moneychangers from the temple. Matthew in his gospel adds this statement *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"*

The Greek word for 'stirred' is *eseisthe*, which in Matthew 27 immediately following the death of Jesus, is translated as 'earthquake'. Maybe the importance of Palm Sunday 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.

What we know is that the people wanted a King. And they wanted a prophet, as long as he didn't denounce them. We want to be rescued, but not really in a way that asks too much, or causes us to change our lives.

False prophets, some within the christian church, promise much but do not require surrender to Christ. The freedom Jesus gives goes very deep because will give us everything, but in return we have to be prepared to lay down everything. And so as He said, once we have put our hand to the plough – once we have committed ourselves, there is no turning back.

This is hard. There are several instances in the gospels when disciples found his teaching too hard, and turned away.

John 6:63 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.

Many of the disciples who sang Hosanna on the first Palm Sunday were shouting 'Crucify Him' 5 days later.

Our world post pandemic is very different. Some have turned back and no longer follow Him. I think God is challenging us, not just as a church, but as a nation. Whether we learn the lessons and work to make our society better and more just and equitable for everyone remains to be seen. The signs are that the opposite is the case. that the rich get obscenely rich and the poor get poorer, and the driver of this is greed. Our message as a church *must* be the good news that the only way to maintain truth, integrity and justice is to follow Jesus, as the single voice that can be trusted, because it's He who brings healing and wholeness, and He who sets captives free. It's he who shows us that we're captive to many things which we need to surrender to Him.

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 very soon pass away. The words of Jesus will never pass away and this is what we celebrate today.

The time to turn back to God is now.

Amen.