**Another Look at the King**

*Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Luke 19:28-40*

*13th April 2025*

Well, it is Palm Sunday which means that Easter is just round corner. I am sure you have noticed that the older you get these great festivals seem to come round much quicker! Having followed Jesus towards Jerusalem during the days of Lent, today we come to celebrate his entry into the Holy city. The event is recorded in all four of the Gospels, and in one of them, in John’s gospel the cheering crowds are waving palm branches to greet Jesus. So, we call it Palm Sunday and as a symbol of the day we are given Palm leaves twisted into crosses.

But if we lived in Ethiopia we would call it ‘Hosanna Sunday’, we would all be dressed in white, and take part in great open-air celebrations waving real palm branches. If we lived in certain parts of Ireland in the olden days we may have called it ‘Yew Sunday’, because the green branches that were blessed and distributed would have come from the yew trees rather than the less available palm trees. Similarly, in Latvia, it would be called ‘Pussy Willow Sunday’, as the branches that were used would come from the willow trees.

If we lived in Finland we might find children dressed up as good witches knocking on our doors offering willow branches and pronouncing blessings on our house in exchange for some ‘small’ gifts. The word used for the tradition is ‘refreshment day’ and clearly has some pagan origins, which have now been assimilated into the Christian marking of the day. And, of course, there are churches, which celebrate with actual donkey rides calling to mind Jesus, the ‘King’, who, instead of a war-horse, rides a humble donkey. So, in one way or another, Christians all over the world do celebrate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. And in one way or another they are enlisting the help of available natural resources, some kind of greenery to commemorate the actions of the original Jerusalem crowd.

The Gospel accounts of Palm Sunday are full of Biblical references. And when I say biblical references, I mean references from *their* Bible, the Jewish Bible we call the Old Testament. Writing on the other side of the tremendous events of Good Friday, and especially of Easter, the Gospel writers see an organic connection between Israel’s long-cherished expectations and the unfolding events of Holy week. And we have an even longer perspective as we hear the story with the addition of 2000 years of lived Christian experience and tradition both in our ordinary lives and in our liturgical practices. We joyfully celebrate with the Jerusalem crowd of Jesus’ day. We sing praises to the King, the son of David with our inherited songs using the ancient words of the prophet Zechariah, who seemed to have inspired Jesus when he staged his entry in such memorable, almost theatrical fashion.

“...*shout in triumph, daughter of Jerusalem*

*see your king is coming to you,*

*his cause won, his victory gained,*

*humble and mounted on a donkey.” (Zecch 9:9-10)*

We are so used to the scene that we never stop for a minute to think of how out of character all this is for the Jesus we know from the synoptic gospel stories. The Jesus, who has rejected any signs of popular celebrity status as far back as his temptations in the wilderness before his ministry ever started. The Jesus who quietly taught people, healed people approaching them with a compassionate heart and often forbade them even to speak to others about his good deeds. And now we see him in the middle of all the adulation and praise and worship due to a real victorious king. Or, in terms of contemporary Jewish expectations, the long- awaited Saviour, the Messiah, God’s own Anointed One; The One, who would change the fortunes of the nation, who would make them great again and preferably trample under foot all their enemies.

 With the wisdom of hindsight it is easy to see that it was a kind of wrongly directed worship and praise because it was addressed to an idea rather than the living God, who energised Jesus in his actions. So it poses for us the Lenten question, what kind of God do we worship? Is it of our own making, suiting our own needs or are we willing and open to be surprised by the ways in which God comes to us?

 Well, this year, as I re-read all the different accounts of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem it occurred to me that there may be a different way of looking at this story. In Matthew’s gospel the people of Jerusalem are asking: ‘who is this’ when they see Jesus and the big procession. And the answer comes: ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee’. This was a kind of ‘aha!’ moment for me. Jesus never aspired to any of the great titles people wanted to attribute to him. He accepted the title ‘rabbi’, which simply means teacher but as some others thought of him, he also thought of himself as a prophet. Earlier in Luke’s gospel he gives his reason for heading towards Jerusalem saying: ‘*it is unthinkable for a prophet to meet his death anywhere but Jerusalem’. (Luke 13:33)*

 So, if Jesus is acting here as a prophet than perhaps we can understand more of this out-of-character action. Prophets often used ‘visual aids’, so-called enacted prophecies to make their message clearer to people, and these were often out-of-character actions. We can think of the prophet Hosea who was told to marry a prostitute to symbolise the intimate love between God and Israel; The covenant, that was often broken by the people of God, but to which God always remained faithful. *(Hosea 1:1-2)* There was the prophet Jeremiah, who bought a piece of land at great expense just outside Jerusalem, at a time when the city was already attacked by the Babylonians and would shortly be occupied by them. It was to illustrate that, in spite of the dire present outlook God would restore the land to the Israelites in the future. *(Jer. 43:8-13*).

These prophetic en-actments are usually countercultural, disruptive and their purpose is to shake people out of their slumber, out of their resigned acceptance of the status quo, to make them wake up to God’s reality. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is certainly doing that! It is countercultural against the Roman occupying forces, showing them in a subtle, subversive way that, in spite of all appearances, a single donkey can be superior to all the war horses the establishment can muster. It is also counterintuitive against Israel’s own expectations, against the kind of saving God they think they need; the kind of God who comes with ‘holy violence’ and can only save some by destroying others.

And how timely this wake-up call is in our own day! Just think of the world situation now. We still live as if this was the solution to our problems. To pull up the draw-bridges, build stronger walls, use the effects of spiralling trade-wars, supply the weapons to anybody with any current or age-old grievances. It is clear that we are as much in need of true prophets today as humanity has ever been. Jesus’ prophetic action points to an important way of being God’s mouth-piece, if you will, beyond words: The use of the en-acted prophecy, which I believe we are all called to as Jesus’ followers. To find the striking, non-violent, counter-cultural ways both as individuals and as a church community to show what we believe our God is like: The God, who comes in peace, in humility, in compassion and in love.

This is not an easy task. Prophets are never universally popular. Jesus is not riding towards a successful middle age, and comfortable senior years. He is riding towards the cross. But by this very direction he demonstrates that he is riding in hope, in the firm conviction that through suffering and death, which is the common lot of all of us human beings, God’s promise is never to leave us or forsake us.

So, in this understanding of the Palm Sunday story Jesus calls us to follow him in a prophetic way: yes, to speak truth to power and do it in a humble but hopeful way. But more than that, instead of closing off ourselves in some superior holiness, to become open, enacting, prophetic communities, in which something of the amazing, generous love of God can be seen and experienced. Where relationships are mended, where the least may find an honoured place, where people dare to be different in order to follow Jesus, where truth may be spoken with love and compassion, where the upholding, binding warmth of the community may be enjoyed by all. Where donkeys are valued and nature is cherished and even the road-side stones are allowed to shout. May it be so here at Amersham Free Church.

*Erna Stevenson*