



Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 2nd April 2023

Palm Sunday.

Readings: Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11

Today is a great day.

Today is an exciting day.

Today is Palm Sunday.

It is the day when we especially remember Jesus coming at last to Jerusalem. It is the climax of his ministry. The climax of the years of travelling round the towns and villages of Galilee and coming at last to the big city. But Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book entitled 'the last WEEK' suggest that there was not one but two processions approaching the city.

The first is a Roman column of soldiers being led by Pontius Pilate. They are travelling up from the West, from Pilate's palace at Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast in order to be in Jerusalem for Passover; not, of course, to celebrate the festival but to keep the peace. We can picture the scene, almost hear and smell the scene. Pilate on his charger, coming with the authority of Rome. His wife perhaps being carried in a palanquin. We see the pennants flying. We hear the jingle of the harnesses and we hear the horses snorting and tossing their heads as they catch the scent of blood and sacrifice on the wind. We see the strong, hard faces of the legionaries; the steady beat as they march towards the city. They were not coming to make friends but to remind the people where real power lay. They were there showing who was boss. They were there showing who was god for the emperor Tiberius inherited the titles given to Augustus, Son of God, Lord, Saviour, bringer of peace. The city was heaving with people as they came, forcing their way through the surly crowds. It is estimated that the population of Jerusalem was about 40,000 but at Passover that could shoot up to 200,000 crammed into the ancient citadel resentful of the presence of the Roman military, reminding them of their position as a subjugated nation.

From the East there emerged a very different procession, but one which was clearly planned as a counter demonstration. Jesus, with his friends, had travelled down from Galilee, perhaps accompanied by many other pilgrims and followers. They pause before the final approach and Jesus sends for a donkey for the last stretch of the journey. The symbolism was not lost on that crowd. Knowledgeable about the Scriptures they would have recalled the words of Zechariah, **Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.** And the road was paved with cloaks, and branches of palm leaves. The crowd waved their branches and called out excitedly, **Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Praise the Lord!** It was heady stuff. It was exciting and as this procession edged its way into the city, those already there wanted to know what was going on, who was this man? What was he doing? It is the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.

And what of this prophet, this Jesus? What was he up to? Probably then, or maybe the next day, he made his way to the Temple. There he found the court of the Gentiles filled with crowds milling around. The money changers were busy converting many currencies into the Tyrian coinage which bore no human image and thus was acceptable to the Temple authorities. The traders in doves, pigeons, lambs and so forth were doing good business with people queuing to purchase their gift. Jesus found the scene troubling. Perhaps he was recalling the words of the prophet Amos of several hundred years earlier, **I hate your religious festivals! I cannot stand them! I will not accept the animals you have fattened to bring me as offerings. Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.** J B Phillips describes Amos as rather like a hard Calvinist from remoter

Scotland confronted by the worldliness and luxury of London, New York or Paris. And Jesus set about overturning tables of moneychangers and releasing birds and animals adding to the havoc. In truth the Court of the Gentiles was so vast that probably many didn't know what was going on, though they would have become aware that something was amiss. But Jesus was not just causing havoc: that was not his intention. He was bringing healing, healing to crippled people and sight to blind people. He was declaring **Scripture says, my house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.** Excited children were calling out Hosanna to the Son of David. The authorities were livid but could do nothing for Jesus was thrilling the people and so they dared not act. As Lance pointed out last week the Jewish authorities had already decided that Jesus must die but they had to be careful.

So this was the start of a hugely significant week. Jesus knew what was going on, he knew that by the end of it he would be dead and as we follow him through these final days it seems as if he is deliberately provoking the authorities. Day by day he is telling stories – stories about Two sons, about tenants in a vineyard, about a wedding feast and so on, stories which the priests and Pharisees felt were being deliberately aimed at them. And each day their anger grew and their resolve hardened.

But why was Jesus such a challenge to them? He knew, he understood that for the Temple system to function there had to be the trade, the finance, the business. But he also knew that, almost inevitably, there was corruption and an abuse of power. Contracts given to family members, inflated prices, manipulated rates of exchange. It happened then. It happens now.

He knew there had to be the priestly families but he knew that they had made themselves rich at the expense of the poor. Many of them had become powerful land owners, having gained their lands by foreclosing on debts, by raising rents until they became unaffordable. It happened then. It happens now. The priests were not supposed to own land at all but they applied some flexibility to the rules. They would not actually work the land themselves. They were absentee landlords. They bent the rules. It happened then. It happens now.

But the days of the Temple were numbered. The whole sacrificial system was set to come tumbling down. Within a few years the temple would be a ruin. The leaders of the people had become fixated on self-preservation and had lost their point, lost their purpose. God was taken for granted and so became side-tracked. These were not deliberately wicked people; they did not set out to do wrong, but they had lost their way and the glorious God who should have been at the very centre of the nation, at the very centre of their lives, was overlooked. True, the liturgies continued, great music, great ceremonies but they had become hollow. It happened then and it can happen now.

And Jesus, brought up in poverty, could look at the Temple and see no connection with the lives of people like him. That wasn't what God wanted. What God wanted was justice and righteousness. What God wanted was people who loved him and lived according to his will. What God wanted was honesty and integrity, love and compassion. What God wanted.....then, is what God wants now.

And as the days progressed he gathered his twelve friends around him as they shared a meal, probably a Passover meal. They would have remembered how blood was spilt to mark the homes of the people, to protect them and to lead them to freedom. And Jesus made his friends his blood brothers, giving them bread and wine, interpreted as his body and blood. The intensity, the spiritual pressure in that room must have been enormous and perhaps something had to give. As it was Judas Iscariot slipped out of that room and set his life on the path to destruction. But he was one of the Twelve.

Jesus led the others out to Gethsemane where the Temple authorities got him undercover of darkness and that night of deep darkness saw him refusing to give way, refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Roman governor over him and accepting his fate.

And on Friday morning he was led out to die. Because we know, not the end of the story, for that is not yet, but we know how the story continues we await next Sunday with eager anticipation. We are part of that continuing story as servants of that gracious Lord. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, writing as a Jew says something which I hold to be profoundly true. **I remain in awe, he writes, I remain in awe at the challenge God has set us; to be different, iconoclasts of the politically correct, to be God's question mark against the conventional wisdom of the age, to build, to change, to mend the world until it becomes the place worthy of the divine presence because we have learned to honour the image of God that is humankind.** But that's not quite right. God didn't wait for this place to become worthy of the divine presence. He came among us in Jesus Christ who lived and died that we might walk with him even to the cross and beyond. For here is the true Son of God, Lord, Saviour, Prince of Peace. To him be glory now and forever.