

Palm Sunday Reflection – Matthew 21:1-13,17: ‘The Messiah we don’t expect’

Palm Sunday is such a familiar story to many of us. We celebrate it every year, and many of you will be missing receiving your Palm Cross today. The image of Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem is one etched into our minds, and we usually approach this day with a mixture of excitement and awe. Excitement that privations of Lent are nearly over, that the biggest week of our year is upon us, that the crowds are cheering Jesus on. And awe, perhaps, too, because we know what comes next, and how quickly the crowd turns. How quickly perhaps we turn, too.

On Palm Sunday Jesus reveals himself as both the Jewish Messiah and the King for the whole world. The donkey is significant, as Matthew’s quotation of Zechariah makes clear: Jesus was proclaiming his humility, but also fulfilling a great prophecy which related to God’s appointed rescuer. That’s why the crowds were excited. The Rescuer was arriving in Jerusalem, just as Zechariah had predicted 500 years ago.

But even as Jesus raises their hopes, he confounds them too. His first act is to go into the temple and challenge the materialism and corruption of the biggest festival in the Jewish year. Why does Jesus go on about being ‘a house of prayer for all nations’? Because the market stalls were set up in the Court of the Gentiles. The temple was separated into various areas, or courts, which certain groups of people could use. The *one* area reserved for non-Jews was the Court of the Gentiles, it was the only place in the temple where they could pray. But not if their court was filled with Jewish market stalls.

In this one episode, we see how God’s people had failed to be what God had intended them to be – they were supposed to be a light leading all nations to worship, but instead they had made their faith exclusive and shut people out. That’s why Jesus was angry. His actions were a prophetic act, calling his own people to return to their true calling: God’s love was for the whole world.

Jesus came, but not as they expected him to.

And that theme is one which runs through the whole of the gospels. Jesus constantly surprises us. He comes, but not as we expect. Born a King, but not in a palace, rather an animals’ feeding trough. He prefers the company of the disreputable to the respectable. He is rejected by his home town. He challenges the prevailing interpretation of the Sabbath laws. He withdraws whenever popular excitement gets too much. He demonstrates his authority, but tells people to keep quiet about it.

He arrives in Jerusalem as a king, but on a donkey not a stallion. He receives the embrace of the crowd but then challenges their religious practice. He doesn’t even stay in the city, but as the text finishes, leaves and spends the nights in Bethany. In our days of PR gurus and image management, no self-respecting adviser would recommend any of things. *What sort of a king is he?*

He comes, but not as we expect. And he still comes in unexpected ways today. In these times when our normal habits are being disrupted, when our spiritual practices are disturbed and interrupted, we find ourselves again looking to meet Jesus in unexpected ways.

And the good news of this passage is that this is exactly what Jesus does. He is not an upholder of the religious establishment or the old ways. Jesus is not limited to our buildings or our books. He is always making everything new. *His Spirit, like the wind, is wild and free.* He is perfectly able to meet with us where we are, to bring us joy in unexpected places, and the peace that transcends understanding. He is with us right now....

Back in January, who knew that we would be doing what we're doing today? But Jesus is still meeting us. And, I suspect, meeting many others who might never have opened the door to our ancient building. And we rejoice in that.

And my prayer is that Jesus would keep meeting us, keep leading us through this season, and keep renewing us in his love. He still comes to us in unexpected ways today.

Let's hold a moment of quiet before our prayers.....

Amen.