

Sunday 10th April 2022 – ‘The Hope of the Church’ (1 Cor 15:50-58, Matthew 21:1-13,17)

It's been a week of dramatic entrances and exits. Last weekend Will Smith made his exit from the Academy after his even more notorious entrance on stage at the Oscars the weekend before. This week also saw Volodymyr Zelensky make a globally-reported Zoom entry at the United Nations, and the sports press are full of excitement at Tiger Woods' surprise entry at the US Masters Golf. Sadly, for many others this week, their proposed exit abroad on holiday has also been massively disrupted at a number of UK airports.

It is somehow fitting that today we look at one of the most dramatic entrances of all – Jesus' entry into Jerusalem – as well as one of the most important exits: one that affects all of humanity.

Today is Palm Sunday and we conclude our series 'Surprised by Hope' by looking at 'the Hope of the Church'. And at first sight, you might well be asking: what exactly do these have to do with each other? How do our two passages relate? Another way to put it might be: how is Matt going to shoehorn both smoothly into a short sermon?! Believe me, I managed to talk about Jesus' Second Coming on Mothering Sunday two weeks ago, so this is a low-level challenge!

In actual fact, the two passages are not as different as we might think. If we start with the first phrase of our reading from 1 Corinthians, **St Paul poses a fundamental problem which defines the story of Scripture:** 'I declare to you that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.' And yet, God made us to enjoy life with him forever. So how on earth – literally *on earth* – can this be resolved?

We know the answer: **God comes to sort it himself. To use the language of Paul's letter, the immortal becomes mortal for a season.** Jesus is born as flesh and blood, one of us. His mission is to reconcile God and humanity, which he does first in his own body. But it's not enough just to provide the template, he is also the solution. He is God's own anointed and appointed rescuer, a fact which is attested by the great crowds which gather in Jerusalem on what we now know as Palm Sunday. Having demonstrated his authority over the previous three years with his divine wisdom, divine love *and* divine power, he is now hailed as King, indeed the great king promised by the prophets: 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'

It is one of the great entrances of all history, but what happens next shocks everyone but Jesus himself. **The Immortal who became mortal now experiences that mortality to its fullest extent:** suffering betrayal, isolation, emotional pain, then intense physical pain and finally the ultimate expression of human mortality: death itself. What you might call the ultimate exit, the reality for every human being.

So Palm Sunday gives way to Good Friday, and this week we return to this annual journey. I hope and pray that God speaks as powerfully as always, as we absorb just what Jesus does for us, what he suffers on our behalf, what it cost the Immortal to become mortal....

....but we also know it doesn't end there: because Good Friday itself gives way to Easter Day. As St Peter wonderfully describes it 7 weeks later to another large crowd in Jerusalem: 'God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, **because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.**'

I love that last phrase: Jesus possesses so much life, it literally fizzles out of him with so much energy and power that death cannot contain it. The stone rolls away, the tomb is empty – Jesus is alive!

We're getting ahead of ourselves: but let's just spend a few moments reflecting how this relates to our first passage in Corinthians. **Jesus' resurrection reverses the process: now mortality has been clothed with immortality** – what was perishable is now risen from the dead, imperishable. Death, as Paul says, has been swallowed up in victory. It is the answer to that poser Paul starts with: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, that's true. But Jesus can: and as he fills his followers with his resurrection life, so we mortals can be clothed with immortality. We will still die, but we can now affirm, just as Paul does: 'where, o death is your victory, where is your sting?' It can't hurt us anymore because the resurrected Jesus can now bring life to all who join with him.

As we bring our series to a close, **let's go back to where we started: the resurrection of Jesus is the hope of the church.** Jesus' resurrection both completes and starts a chain of events that slots everything else into place. We can now be reconciled to God, we can now enjoy his presence, we now have assurance of eternal life, we have a future hope of a renewed creation as heaven and earth join together in one glorious, healed cosmos; and we have a new purpose which energises and inspires us for the rest of our lives on this earth.

This is the hope of the church, and as we gather with the crowds in Jerusalem we can remind ourselves that this is where it leads. Despite many twists and turns, the crowds were right to herald Jesus as the coming King – even if the journey of his kingship was so different to what they had expected.

But as I draw the threads together, let's not lose sight of the last of those glorious truths I shared just now: we have a purpose which energises and inspires for the rest of our lives on this earth. It's fascinating that St Paul finishes his glorious reflection on the things of heaven by saying this: 'Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.**'

Our hope is one that God calls us to share. One that we actively participate in: the reality of our glorious future in heaven is not one we just wait around for, or pat ourselves on the back for, or treat as something we're entitled to – it inspires us to do whatever we can to bring that reality a bit more fully 'on earth, as it is in heaven.'

We may only experience the fullness of immortality on the other side of the grave, but we get to share a bit of it here: to be bringers of peace, hope and joy; of compassion and justice; of beauty, creativity and order. **The Church exists to act as an incubator of this kind of life, as well as a signpost of this new creation which God is bringing.** What will that mean for you today? This Easter? This year?

May God surprise us all with hope again this Easter – and may we also be filled with his life to *be* that hope to others, too. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.