

Sermon for Palm Sunday - Matt 21:1-11, 19- end and Psalm 118:1-2,19-end

You might be quite familiar with today's reading from Matthew's gospel. Palm Sunday comes every year and so every year we read of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey; being acclaimed by the crowds, having his path covered in coats and being fanned by multitudes of branches from the trees. It is a glorious picture and must have been really exciting at the time, even if in hindsight, we now see this episode as the beginning of the end for Jesus.

It is a glorious narrative which gives us a picture of Jesus kingship and rule beginning, but also a story which sends a shiver down the spine as we look with the knowledge of Good Friday on how the story unfolds, and the fickleness of the crowd.

However, I want to draw our attention briefly to the point of the story - the interpretation of the careful choreography that Jesus orchestrated beforehand. The key verse is verse 10 – 'When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"'

The whole point of the story is to continue to answer this question of who Jesus is – a question which the whole of the gospels seem to ask and answer continually. The response of the crowd in verse 11 is that he is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth. And this is absolutely true in as far as it goes. But it is like saying that Winston Churchill was a young army officer in the Boer War, or like saying Spider-Man was a young reporter with the Daily Planet. Neither description really encapsulates the significance of the character despite both statements being true.

The crowd clearly know who Jesus is on one level. But not every prophet from a minor backwater is welcomed into Jerusalem like Jesus was. Even the crowd instinctively knew there was something different about Jesus, despite not being able to articulate it. They'd had to fall back on what they knew - Psalms and Jewish statements about their promised Messiah. These phrases, likely learned as children, had given them the words they needed to express the wonder they felt at Jesus and their best guess at who he really was. But when asked about it, they really didn't know much more.

Thus, the whole story becomes a bit of a riddle - who is this Jesus character who supernaturally arranges his transport? Who is this Jesus who rides in on a donkey to fulfil prophecies from long ago about Israel's King? Who is this Jesus who the crowd openly acknowledge as a prophet whilst their actions and celebrations seem to proclaim him much more than that?

The answer to the riddle is played out across all the gospel stories, but particularly over the Easter week. This man who is a prophet, does a kingly thing but in a supernatural way, and is celebrated as Messiah, the one come to save Israel. After today's reading, he then cleans a temple out, falls into dispute with authorities, gets betrayed and abandoned by his friends and then tortured and killed.

Who is this Jesus?

And then let's not forget, who is this Jesus who rises to life on the third day, Easter morning?

So, for this week, Easter week, I'm setting homework! As you live through the Easter story again, beginning at Palm Sunday today with the crowd's question, 'Who is Jesus?' try to work out the answer. Who is Jesus for you? What does all this mean for you? Why does it matter who he is? And finally, what do I need to do about it?

I'm not going to give answers today but I really want everyone, from whatever background, even if you've never been to church, to grapple with this question this week, 'Who is Jesus?' The answer to that question is why the gospels were written. The answer is the key to faith.

Particularly in these times of national health crisis and a recognition of our mortality like many of us have never experienced before, the question of who Jesus is, is more pressing than ever. It is to Jesus that we turn when we fear. It is to Jesus that we turn when those close to us are in danger. It is to Jesus that we turn when we are looking for some sort of meaning behind the life that we have lived until now. We turn to him in our guilt and shame, in our worry and anxiety, and in our impotence to care for those we can no longer visit. But why do we turn to him as opposed to anything or anyone else? The answer is the same question – we turn to Jesus because of who he is.

So who is Jesus this week? Who is this man who claimed to be God? Who is this King who died for his rebellious people? Who is this savior who lost everything? Who is the dead man who rises? Re-read the story of Easter this week in preparation for Easter Sunday with these questions in mind and pray about them, perhaps for the first time.