



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Palm Sunday

### Year A

**Matthew 21.1-11**

**Philippians 2.5-11**

Many years ago now, it must be almost twenty five, we used to have two donkeys for the Palm Sunday procession, one was Snowflake, the other was George. Snowflake belonged to the Faux family at the farm and George to a friend of ours. Latterly the donkeys lived together in the field behind the vicarage and grew very fond of each other. They simply wouldn't be separated thus we had both of them in the procession. There was something very moving about having real donkeys there as the Palm Sunday gospel was read, particularly, 'You will find a donkey tied and her colt tied with her.'

The Palm Sunday service begins with Liturgy of the Palms, the account of the wonderful triumphal entry by Jesus into Jerusalem, his own city, and then moves to the account of the passion. Thus the service changes from a mood of joy to deep sadness. The gospel account of the passion is read because if people only came to church on Palm Sunday and then again on Easter Day the whole of Holy week would be missed.

So we have the wonderful account of Jesus' entering into the city from Matthew's gospel. Last week we read in John's gospel of Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus. At the end of that account we have the ominous words of Caiaphas,

<sup>50</sup> "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' ... <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they planned to put him to death.' (John 11)

These words echo in the back of our minds. Jesus is in grave danger; the glorious entry is only ephemeral. We know the storm clouds are gathering. In Matthew's account Jesus has just healed the blind man. The festival of the Passover was near but as St. John stresses the people assess the mood and Jesus' danger.

<sup>55</sup> 'Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup>They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as

they stood in the temple, 'What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?' (John 11)

Jesus knows very well what the danger is but he is walking in the way ordained by his Father, as St. Paul puts it in the reading from Philippians, he, 'became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.'

Jesus, like thousands of other Jews, was coming to celebrate the festival of Passover at Jerusalem. It is the aim of every Jew to do this. Even when celebrating the Seder meal at Passover in other countries today the ending is the exclamation, 'Next year in Jerusalem.' Passover is the celebration of freedom, when the Jewish people were led by Moses from captivity in Egypt. Each family was instructed to bake unleavened bread and the lambs were killed and the blood was sprinkled on the doorpost and lintels of their houses so they were saved from harm when the angel of death passed over the land. They escaped captivity and crossed safely over the Red Sea at the parting of the waters in God's great act of deliverance. The city would have been seething with pilgrims. Jesus knows that this is his last journey and that he will die at Calvary. The synoptic gospels begin in a similar way when describing the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem,

<sup>1</sup> 'When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.' (Matthew 21)

The Mount of Olives and the garden of Gethsemane are outside the walls of the city just to the east and the villages of Bethphage and Bethany are a little further east still. So Jesus would be approaching the city from the Jericho road. The disciples go and find things exactly as Jesus had told them.

'This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,'

So often in Matthew's gospel we have quotations from the scriptures and the words, 'thus it was to fulfil' or something similar. He is showing how the Jewish scriptures point to Jesus' as the Messiah.

'Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

This is from Zechariah 9.9, so Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of the coming of Israel's king. What kind of a king, is he, 'humble and riding on a donkey' and Zechariah goes on to explain further,

<sup>10</sup> 'He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.'

The Messiah will bring peace, not just to Jerusalem and the Jews but to the whole world, that is exactly right. Jesus is Messiah but he is also king of the cosmos, he is Lord and God. Many of the Jews see him as a warrior king who will throw out the hated Romans by force, they cannot understand much less accept his message of peace and love.

Jesus' fame has gone before him, people have heard of his wonders and 'signs' so of course they pour out to see him, this is their king and they expect so much.

<sup>8</sup> 'A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Jesus is, 'the 'Son of David,' he is seen as the Messiah. He is the blessed one 'who comes in the name of the Lord.' Now his popularity is at its highest, the crowd is shouting for him; the disciples, despite Jesus' warnings about the Son of Man approaching death, must have felt elated. This is not just the usual rabble rouser; this man is different, hailed as a royal king of David's line and God's Messiah. We are told that, 'the whole city was in turmoil,' indeed it was, this is the 'prophet Jesus.' But how quickly crowds can turn and particularly with the help of rabble rousers. Of course we know that this week will culminate in God's great act of deliverance through Jesus. His death and resurrection will bring salvation to all who believe in him and herald God's new creation.

We know of the fear Herod the Great felt at the news of the 'king born in Bethlehem.' We know how he acted in the atrocity of the slaughter of the innocents. Here is Jesus, now in the holy city, he is a threat to the present King Herod, a threat to the Romans because of his following; these people expected the Messiah to overthrow the Romans by force.

The entry has echoes of another triumphal march into Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus. He cleansed the Temple in December B.C. 164 and restored the services. The re-consecration of the Temple became a permanent Jewish holiday, Hanukkah. One of Jesus' first actions is to overturn the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Although it was not the restoration of the Temple for worship it would have had echoes of that earlier cleansing when the occupying force was overthrown.

Jesus is a threat to the Jewish leaders and priests and the religious circle who fear him and who are deeply jealous of him. They have already issued orders for his arrest. Jealousy is one of the most powerful forces on earth and coupled with fear often can lead to destruction. These people want Jesus out of the way by fair means or foul. We already know this and have seen his clashes with the scribes and Pharisees on numerous occasions. In Luke's gospel at this point he tells us how they complained to Jesus

<sup>39</sup> 'Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' <sup>40</sup>He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.' (Luke 19)

The threat Jesus posed to them has now become the reason to kill him. Jesus knows the danger he is in, he knows what the authorities are plotting, and he knows crowds are fickle. Popularity one minute can turn to mob violence the next. However he knows that he is doing his Father's will and that only by his death in love can he redeem humanity and win salvation for us. So Holy Week begins and we know that Good Friday will follow swiftly as we prayerfully follow our Lord's footsteps.

The epistle reading is Philippians 2.5-11 with the crucifixion at the centre. The long gospel reading is the account of the crucifixion. I will not deal with it in this Reflection; I will concentrate on the epistle reading. Of all the bible passages this must be one of my favourites. I can't help but be amazed at the way, like John 1, it deals with all the central tenets of our faith.

Paul began his letter with words of instruction for Jesus' new followers in Philippi.

<sup>27</sup> 'Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,' (Philippians 1)

Here at the beginning of chapter two Paul continues to teach the Philippian church the pattern of Christian life. It is, if you like, applied theology – faith in Jesus lived out in your own life and the life of the Church. It applies as much to us and any Christian as it did to the Philippians all those years ago. It is a pity that the reading for today begins at verse 5 so I quote it in full here,

<sup>2</sup> 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.'

Paul's emphasis is on unity and love. He knows that it is conflict that divides peoples and nations. That is not to say that we are all clones or have to have the same opinions, that would be impossible and ridiculous. Look at the different Trinitarian churches today, they have different practices, different ways of worshipping but they are all doing what they do to the honour of Jesus Christ, God and King. That is the material point. That is what Paul was saying when he talked about observation of different feast days or eating different things. So long as what you do is in accordance with Jesus' teaching and to his honour that is fine. After all, we have a lot to learn from each other. That is really what Paul means when he says at verse two, 'be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.' The point is they must be of one mind in 'sharing in the Spirit,' in other words motivated by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Paul is giving them a concise picture of Jesus' way. He sums it up brilliantly and succinctly.

<sup>3</sup> 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' Actually that is a guide for life within, families, communities, churches, institutions. It is what Jesus says when asked what should be done to inherit eternal life, 'Love God and one another' that is the model for life.

Paul understands Jesus' teaching and he knows how these first Christians must behave if the Church is to be built on the foundations Jesus laid. Paul is not giving some idealistic set of rules but a pattern built firmly on Jesus' teaching and for Paul there can be no other way for true Christians to behave. Jesus has made it abundantly clear that there are no half and half measures, a Christian has to be committed to following him and his good news. Sometimes that commitment will be costly as Jesus' instruction, 'Take up your cross and follow me,' encapsulates.

Paul knows that the things that will destroy this community quicker than anything are, 'selfish ambition and conceit.' There is no room for self-seeking or self-aggrandisement. Think of Jesus' comments about those who stand at the street corner showing off about fasting or praying. Ambition is not Jesus' way. No, they are to think others better than themselves. It is humility that Paul is advocating. He does not just leave it at this but he grounds his words in 'the mind of Christ,' in Jesus' example. That is his illustration for them.

What follows, our gospel reading for today, is I think one of the most beautiful poems expressing the nature of Jesus. It was, with Colossians 1.15-20, one of the earliest hymns of praise in the early church. It is in fact a creedal statement, a statement of belief. Paul in just a few sentences is



developing Christology. Christology is really the study of the person of Christ, his divinity and manhood. The gospels are clear about it but only John really develops it. Later of course the early church would have to work out this theology more specifically but here we have it in its early form. There is nothing equivocal about Paul's writing here and it is a beautifully crafted piece. He is linking it to what has gone before in the instructions he gave to the Philippians. The key note of behaviour must be selfless humility and the motivation for action must be love –<sup>5</sup> 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,' (Philippians 2) Jesus gave the example to follow.

The Jesus Christ Prayer, as I am going to call it begins,

<sup>6</sup> 'who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited'

Here is Paul's clear statement of Christ as pre-existent with God. We think of John 1.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Jesus is seen as 'with God' from the beginning. He did not 'cling to equality with God' to use the old translation, Jesus' equality to God is clearly stated. That is a huge claim. Imagine how counter cultural this was for those first believers, no wonder they were persecuted. That however is the centre of Christian belief. In humility Jesus took on human form uniting it to his divinity, not a prince not living a life of privilege but

'taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness'

Jesus lived the life of a humble carpenter, born in a stable, a refugee almost at birth. Paul explains clearly that Jesus is equally God and man. Then goes on to the central point, the cross,

<sup>8</sup> 'he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.'

Jesus died for humanity on the cross. By his death he took away our sin, he won salvation for us and restored our relationship with God, our loving Father. Paul stresses the resurrection; Christ is alive and conquered death forever.

<sup>9</sup> God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.'

That is why every knee should bow at the name of Jesus. Not incidentally, at the name of the Emperor who styled himself a god and demanded it. No, there is only one Lord and that is Jesus Christ. These first Christians were to find themselves living out these lines because they would not bow down to the Emperor, they would only confess that Jesus Christ was Lord and God. For many of them it meant death. These words of Paul are central to Christian belief and action.

One hymn we know which is inspired by this passage is, 'At the name of Jesus' and it is very worthwhile to read the hymn in conjunction with Philippians 2. Paul puts all this theology so

beautifully it reminds me of a line from George Herbert's poem 'Prayer' he says that prayer is, 'the soul in paraphrase.' Well here Paul has managed, I think, to put the nature of Christ, his incarnation and resurrection in paraphrase. To teach clearly that Jesus' Christ is God and man, crucified and risen. The beauty of his words inspires us with wonder.

Worship is at the centre, our tongues must confess him as Lord and God and our knees bow at his name, not us alone but the entire creation. I think the hymn that encapsulates Jesus' nature is one of my favourites, 'Meekness and majesty',

*Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony, the man who is God. Lord of eternity dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet.* Graham Kendrick.

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