

10 April 2022

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 23:1-49

What does one say by way of sermon on this day? On this day, and through the days ahead, we face the most profound mystery of our faith: that the Son of God should die. There is so much that could be said, so many details that could be dwelt on and amplified. But to dwell on the details risks losing sight of the wood for the trees. I will therefore be brief, and will pick up on just one of the many possible themes we could take.

We have in our liturgy this morning re-enacted two events that are linked but strikingly contrasting: the action of the crowd as they welcomed Jesus as king, accompanying him on his entry into Jerusalem with waving branches and cries of Hosanna!; and the action of the crowd just a few days later as they bayed for his blood.

We have seen again recently how crowds can behave, the strange dynamic that seems to prompt individuals to do things they would never do on their own, aligning themselves with causes without much prior thought about the implications.

The key issue, linking both the entry into Jerusalem and the trials and execution of Jesus, is the question of who Jesus is and what his coming means to people.

Jesus comes in peace. Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. In Jewish understanding, if a conquering king comes into the city riding a horse, then his intention is war and destruction. If he comes riding on a donkey, then his intention is peace. This is the background to the sentence from Zechariah quoted in John's particular account of the triumphal entry, "Do not be afraid, Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

Jesus comes to a nation that is not ready for him. Apparently some rabbis taught that if Israel was not ready when the Messiah came, he would ride the foal of a donkey; but if she was ready, he would ride a white horse.¹

Jesus comes with a spiritual mission. While in popular piety the Messiah was expected to come as a conquering hero on a political mission, many of the background Scriptures pointed more to a spiritual mission – the restoration of relationship with God. Nevertheless, such a spiritual mission necessarily has political consequences: restoration of a right relationship with God must have a bearing on how we live with one another in society.

The psychology of the events that follow Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are not recorded, so we have to be somewhat speculative. But it is clear that in his ministry, heightened by his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus represented a threat to many different individuals and groups. And the threat that Jesus represents finds a response from the religious authorities, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, and the crowd as Jesus goes through his trials. For the religious authorities, the issue was that they could not accept his implicit claim to be Messiah.

For Pilate the prospect of a king of any kind put his position at risk, both his position within Jerusalem and his reputation back home with Rome.

The crowd, especially if it was a group who favoured the kind of violent uprising demonstrated by the activity of Barabbas, had no time for Jesus' humble 'service of love' approach. They wanted the Romans done away with – and clearly Jesus wasn't going to deliver that."²

When someone does not meet our expectations, strong feelings bubble up. We get disappointed or angry. If someone thought to be wonderful, a star, turns out to be something else, derision is often the result. We need only think of how a sports star can be lauded and become, perhaps without their

¹ Card, p.153

² Adapted from English, pp.229-230

intention, regarded as a role model; only to quickly become the subject of mockery and scorn as some character flaw is revealed.

Jesus did not seek celebrity, nor the applause and praise of the crowd. That was the result of the expectations that they heaped on him. When they were disappointed that he did not turn out to be their conquering king, they scorned him. The Roman soldiers and Pilate did not want him to be king but they took him to be making such a claim: when he turned out to be apparently powerless, they mocked him.

We need to remember that the way Jesus chose is a judgement and rebuke on human values and systems of any time. There is much around us at the present time that highlights the flaws of the values and systems of our present society, the values and systems we tend to live by – or that we at least give license to.

‘Giving to gain’, ‘dying to live’, ‘measuring time by eternity’, ‘estimating greatness by the degree of lowly service’, ‘first being last and last first’, and ‘the meek inheriting the earth’ do not simply cause mocking, they produce great anger. They run completely counter to the expected ways of the world. True followers of Jesus, following his humble way in any age, need to be prepared for much of the same kind of response that Jesus received.”³

I said at the beginning that the key issue, linking both the entry into Jerusalem and the trials and execution of Jesus, is the question of who Jesus is and what his coming means to people.

As the story of the Jesus’ sufferings unfolds, all misunderstand who Jesus is.

The challenge for us is that we all have expectations, we all have our own idea of who Jesus is and what he means for us. It is very easy for us to make Jesus in our own image, to project our own wants, and fears, and needs onto him. But Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is Lord, being in very nature God,

³ Largely following English, p. 230

exalted to the highest place, given the name that is above every name. He isn't like a fairy godmother, he hasn't come to give us everything we wish for; he hasn't come to make life comfortable for us; he hasn't come to protect us from illness or hardship; he hasn't come to deal to our enemies; he hasn't come to give us success in politics or business. Jesus comes from the heart of God, he comes in humility and peace, he comes to gather us back to the Father's heart, he comes to save us to live in God's new heaven and new earth when all values and expectations will be turned the right way up.

As we today symbolically arrive in Jerusalem with Jesus, there are questions we must face. A kind of self-examination is appropriate.

Are we simply falling in with someone else's expectation?

Are we going along for the trip in the hope that Jesus will fulfil some of *our* hopes and desires?

Are we ready to sing a psalm of praise only as long as Jesus seems to be doing what we want?

Ultimately, are we ready not only to spread our cloaks on the road in front of him – to do the showy and flamboyant thing – but also now to follow him into trouble, controversy, trial and death?⁴

Sources:

- Michael Card, *The Parable of Joy: Reflections on the wisdom of the Book of John*, Thomas Nelson, 1995
- George R Beasley-Murray, *John*, Thomas Nelson, 2nd Ed, 1999 [Word Biblical Commentary]
- English, *The Message of Mark: the mystery of faith*, Inter-Varsity, 1992 [The Bible Speaks Today]
- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK 2001/2004

⁴ Wright p.230