

Palm Sunday – “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry”

The temptation must have been very real to Jesus, to live a comfortable life in Galilee – a very beautiful part of the Israel – rather than face the coming conflict in Jerusalem. Jesus knew what was happening in Jerusalem. He knew there was scheming; and he knew that the religious authorities were out to – *not just to silence him* - but to kill him. To reassure him, his disciples said to him “nothing is going to happen to you in Jerusalem.” And today would prove to them just how right they were.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem on this donkey ride from Bethany, and arrives at the top of the Mount of Olives, he has a wonderful panoramic view of the city. Below him are the tombs of the prophets, the great prophets, acknowledged celebrated and esteemed with great tombs – but never listened to, despised, rejected and killed by these people. Yet they gave them magnificent tombs!

As Jesus looks at the city walls he considers all the folk inside, his heart is not filled with anger for what they have done, or with anger over what they are about to do, but filled with pity and compassion and with the love of God. He still has nothing but love and compassion for them - and he will not be thwarted from entering the city with his message of their distance from God but God’s closeness to them. And this reveals the way God is towards us all.

I like the way Matthew’s Gospel describes the event of Jesus entering Jerusalem this Palm Sunday. Matthew tells us that the whole city was thrown into turmoil. The excitement at Jesus’ arrival and eventual entry into the city causes fervour of religious joy and excitement. It was viewed as a religious event - as is clear from what some of the people were calling out as Jesus made his way into the city.

The Romans could have been worried but weren’t. Normally this was just the kind of thing that they would have feared - the spectacular rise of a popular leader. Today’s kind of event could have spelt trouble *and normally would have*: so many gathered together, gathered in religious zeal, and gathered under one man - this could have been a serious threat to Roman rule and authority in the region. These were the events that often got out of hand. It could so easily have ended up being one of history’s bloodiest days if it had got out of hand. But the Romans had no fear of this happening – at least not instigated by Jesus himself.

Jesus knew how he was regarded by the Romans. He was seen as little or no threat to the peace: even though he was in a position to cause an uprising. However, there had never been any sign anywhere that Jesus had any intent in political uprising. He paid his taxes, had always been pleasant enough to Roman soldiers – in fact he had even been criticised for his generosity towards them. He had advised the religious that they should render unto Caesar what was Caesar’s. And there was nothing in anything that he had ever said that was inclined to political rebellion.

Pilate had soldiers report back to him every time Jesus had a gathering about him - and an uprising was never part of his sermon. To the Romans Jesus was another religious fanatic who would get himself killed by his own people – the way they had killed all the rest of their own trouble-making prophets. The Romans monitored Jesus but didn’t fear him.

In fact Pontius Pilate was particularly amused by the fact that Jesus was such a thorn in the flesh to Ciaphas, the High Priest. Anything that embarrassed Ciaphas was a great source of amusement to Pilate. Jesus was not fearful of the Roman presence and the Romans had no fear of Jesus as they watched him enter the city – they were fearful, however, that others may use today to cause trouble.

Jesus knew how Ciaphas and the Temple priests regarded him: he was a far greater threat to them than to the Romans. Ciaphas was outraged at Jesus’ disregard for religious tradition and at the way he seemed to take the liberty of reinterpreting scripture in his new way. **That woman** should have been stoned to death, *as the law demanded: Who was he, a carpenter’s boy*, to reinterpret the law? **Healing** on the Sabbath was not up for negotiation and Jesus’ reinterpretation was only further evidence of his disregard of religious law and Temple authority. Furthermore, his stories had an uncanny way of mocking the Temple, the Temple Treasury, and the High Priest even! Such disrespect would not be tolerated.

To Ciaphas he himself was the *Consecrated and Blessed One* in his role as High Priest, while this Jesus of Nazareth had no credentials. As Ciaphas watched the city descend into chaos, following after this Jesus of Nazareth, he was not fearful of Jesus either. He was working on something that would show Jesus of Nazareth who the ‘Lord’s Anointed’ was in this city, and the one whom God had appointed to carry out his will in Jerusalem and in Israel.

This was a great occasion in the history of Jerusalem... a greater occasion than Jerusalem then realised. This was a day of glory, joy and excitement as Jesus was given a *godly welcome*. The music played, the singers

sang, and the dancers danced. Songs of praise sprung spontaneously from groups of people on pilgrimage. There was a cacophony of noise as market traders yelled out their prices, and musicians played, while worshippers praised God for this great and glorious day. Travelling pilgrims sang their own songs of praise, and with each movement through the crowd new sounds greeted Jesus' ears: new songs, new prices, new music and new praises.

Fathers held young children up in the air, high above their shoulders, so they could get a glimpse of Jesus. "Can you see him... Can you see him...? Yes dad there he is". And the air was filled with the thick smell of smoke as the animals - today's sacrifices burning on the sacred altar.

The task for the Temple priests over the next few days was to choose the one, perfect, spotless lamb, which would be offered to the High Priest for sacrifice to God for the annual atonement for the sins of the people. This was the reason for everyone being in Jerusalem at the moment – not to see Jesus – but for the festival of Passover and the highlight of the atonement sacrifice. Among the Temple priests the search for this perfect lamb was now getting underway. And while that was happening Caiaphas was deep in conversation with one of Jesus' disciples. Caiaphas looked happy, more than happy with some arrangement he was making with Judas Iscariot. It was no doubt about Temple Tax, or Temple Trade. He didn't often smile but he was smiling over some deal he had just made. What was that deal with Judas about?

Find out Thursday Evening here 7.00pm!