



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Scripture Passages: Zechariah 9:9-12 & Matthew 21:1-11

+I speak to you in the name of God: the three-in-one: our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

This is the beginning of Holy Week. And usually in Holy Week we are in our churches: we're in that sacred space and walking through this week from the procession of palms to the institution of the eucharist to the liturgy of the passion to the shouts of victory on Easter day.

But today we are in a different place.

We are in our own homes and – frankly, in our own minds -- far more than usual. So, in the midst of the change and displacement that feels negative at the present time because of the Coronavirus crisis, I have made a decision: and it is that I am going to greet this different walk through this Week of Weeks as an opportunity to maybe see and hear things differently too.

And that begins today with Palm Sunday. In the absence of our palms – maybe we can ask different questions of this day. What are some other layers of its meaning that this stripped back experience unveils for us?

I think it's an important question to answer if we're not simply to regard it all as just a nice story – a breather from our Lenten discipline and self-examination. It isn't simply a nice story of course. Palm Sunday has much deep meaning for us as those who follow the Christ. In fact it's a difficult story, and I'd argue that it's the hinge on which holy week turns.

And somehow the key to understanding what's going on in what we call the Palm Sunday Gospel reading actually has to do with that donkey that Jesus rides into Jerusalem. It's got a pretty profound connection with that donkey actually. That donkey was a sign – an indication that things were going to be a little different than people expected.

Let me tell you what I mean – we’ll have to go back to our Gospel for a bit. Well, actually we’ll have to go even further back than that – about 500 years further back from Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Ok, so why a donkey? It seems a strange choice after all. Or maybe not. Because by riding in on that symbol of humility - and in ancient near Eastern tradition, also the symbol of peace (as opposed to the horse which was a symbol of war) it turns out that Jesus was very clearly referencing something – a piece of knowledge and history - that lay in every faithful Jew’s memory: the prophet Zechariah’s prophecy of the Messiah, a king, who would come to set his people free. This Messiah was one who would care for his people Israel. And this is what the prophet said:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

And a few verses later, he says:

He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Now the prophet Zechariah you see, was speaking into an apocalyptic moment. In their original context his words were spoken to a desperate people, a tired nation coming out from under many years of war and exile – a time of displacement and hopelessness and a poverty of spirit.

As I was reading the words of the prophet, I thought of words I had read earlier in the week, [written by Dr. Aisha Ahmad](#) – a political scientist and professor at the university of Toronto who has had extensive experience in war zones. She was speaking of the similarity between those experiences and ours in this Pandemic. She says, “some of my greatest emotional challenges were dealing with the deadly uncertainty, powerlessness, long periods of isolation and mandatory confinement. Wars are not just sporadic moments of intense and horrifying action. In between those bursts are very long periods of crippling boredom and uncertainty.”

And I think we can well imagine – being in the middle of feelings of that nature how much Zechariah’s words must have answered a deep anxiety with assurance and with the promise of deliverance after these experiences.

So. When Jesus referenced these words again to his people 500 years later under similar circumstances - once again under occupation and feeling oppressed - well, it’s no wonder he got the reaction he did.

I mean it's not like he didn't know what would happen if he employed that kind of symbol and imagery among faithful Jews. It was a doubly charged image then, him riding in on that donkey, and I rather think he meant it to be.

To get the feel of what's happening, we need to put ourselves into the shoes – or sandals of the people flowing into Jerusalem on that day for the annual festival of the Passover – a festival celebrating Israel's deliverance from slavery. Now, if you're living in occupied territory, you're probably fed up and looking for any sign that your overlords might be ousted. Enter Jesus on that donkey. Dan-ger-ous. And provocative. St. Matthew says "the whole city was in turmoil."

So, what was he up to? Well, on one level: it's Jesus saying to the people, I, Messiah represent a different way to see the world, a different way to live in it and a different way to treat each other. This is in fact, a rival claim to power both worldly and spiritual; and it's very much a rival claim for the people's allegiance as over against the violence and oppression they were experiencing from their Roman occupiers. That much of his message I think the people understood. And as long as their temporal deliverance was attached to these claims, they could get on board.

But of course, it was actually much more than that. Because Jesus claimed much more about himself. This is the Son of God claiming sovereignty over the world. That's what kings do – they are sovereign. This is Jesus saying that he is sovereign over all people - all things – all governments – all worldly power. In fact, He reigns over all creation.

And those are profound - and profoundly challenging - claims.

Some of the people caught on. That's why we hear those words: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the highest heaven!"

Words that we say every week at the Eucharist – the Benedictus – this is where they come from – this is what they mean. Jesus is finally recognized by some of the people as the Messiah, the one foretold by prophets of old, the answer to every faithful Jew's dream of release from oppression and captivity. No wonder some of them greeted him with such adoration.

Now, if you're thinking, hold up there, bishop. If it's all so "happy families," when does it all go off the rails? And why? If the people are so delighted with Jesus at this moment in time – so happy that they spread out their coats for him and his donkey to walk on like some honoured royalty – when did it all go sideways and why?

Well that's the thing: the crowds expected one kind of Messiah and they got another.

While some adored him and got it - more didn't.

More wanted the kind of Messiah they thought would deliver them from occupation; from the powerlessness and the violence of being oppressed.

And it's in the disappointment of that turn – and the fury of thwarted expectations and the abandonment and alignment with the forces that were threatened by Jesus that follows, that he met his future – which was foretold.

You see what Jesus was offering the people was not the fulfillment of their dreams – but the fulfillment of God's dream for them. He did offer them freedom from occupation just not the obvious kind - the Roman kind.

But he offered them freedom from the occupation of their hearts and minds by sin. They wanted to be free of physical bondage – and he offered them spiritual freedom – the kind of freedom that would make sure they could never be enslaved again.

Think of all the times over the past weeks that we have seen Jesus upending expectations and offering a profound mental and spiritual change:

- offering living water to the woman at the well - quenching spiritual thirst forever instead of offering ordinary water that cures a temporary and temporal thirst;
- offering a healing for spiritual blindness to the man born blind that led to the gift of spiritual sight and a new and transformed life; and
- breathing life into the valley of dead bones and calling life out of Lazarus' tomb – but a new and changed life.

Absolutely none of that was expected but absolutely all of it was so much richer and deeper and so much more life than could have been predicted.

You see, when God shows up, everything changes. When God shows up what happens is SO much better and bigger than anything we can, on our own, ask for or imagine.

So too here: Palm Sunday is a day of paradox. The people expected one kind of Messiah – a temporal savior - and they got another. They expected God to fulfill their expectations and their desires and instead, God was God. The fact is, there is a deeper love at work here: the Lord was working a plan; a plan of salvation for the whole world.

I am very aware as we read about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem that he knew how things would unfold this week: that as I preach on Palm Sunday, I need to keep in mind Good Friday. That even as Jesus ordered up the donkey, he knows he will end up hanging on a Roman cross.

The punishment of the cross was reserved for political enemies. The Romans used crucifixions to send messages. They also used them to wipe out other people's messages – to wipe out other people's lives – entirely.

And in Jesus' case, they tried to send a message of powerlessness, of helplessness, but in the end, it failed. It failed miserably. In the end we tell this story not to commemorate the powers of darkness but to celebrate the power of light: God's power. Because in the end, God's message was far more powerful: the message of Palm Sunday is this: that God SO loved the world that he sent his only beloved Son to show us what God's love looks and feels like. And that whoever believes in him will have abundant life, transformed life – now and in the age to come.

With a message like that, they never had a chance.

And so that is how we begin this holiest of weeks: with that message. And that seems right to me. When so much of our temporal life has been cancelled or threatened, to hear that in Christ we are promised a different kind of life; a transformed and abundant life, is even more comforting and strengthening than I might have appreciated in different times.

And to think, it all began with a donkey. A humble beast of burden. A sign of peace to people of peace. But most importantly to us: a sign that things would never be the same again.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.