

Sermon Notes on Luke 20: 28-40: “Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King”.

Good Morning everyone. Today is of course Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week, leading up to Easter. It is the day when Jesus and his disciples come to Jerusalem as many thousands of other Jews were coming there at the start of the week leading up to the festival of Passover. This was the most important Jewish festival commemorating their ancestors' miraculous release from slavery in Egypt. Thousands upon thousands of Jews from around the countryside and from other towns far and wide in the Eastern Mediterranean area would be gathering in. Some rich, but many poor too.

The whole religious event was of course orchestrated by the Jewish religious authorities, who were the same authorities who were in charge of the great Temple in Jerusalem where it was believed that God occupied a special place. These were the chief priests and elders and all their entourage, with different groupings of Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes and so on whom we read about in the Gospels. They weren't the political or military rulers of their country of course, as it was under occupation by the Romans (and had been so for about the last 90 years). The Romans, though, did not generally force their own religion on the Jews, but tolerated the practice of the Jewish religion as long as their activities did not challenge Roman authority and did not stop a good flow of taxes going back to Rome.

The Temple Authorities themselves raised taxes from the population for the upkeep of the Temple and to give themselves a good income, enabling them and their families to live in large houses on the western side of Jerusalem. One way of making money was the requirement that special Temple coinage be used for the purchase of animals for sacrifice and for other Temple requirements. So other money, such as the Roman currency itself, had to be changed for the Temple money, quite possibly at rather extortionate exchange rates.

Although the Romans had a small permanent garrison in Jerusalem, their main base was on the coast. But it was important too for them to come in force to Jerusalem at a time like this, to make sure order was kept and to display their power. So their governor, Pontius Pilatus, would turn up too with a large military force, quite probably at the same time as Jesus and his disciples were arriving this Sunday.

So this is the big picture backdrop to what's happening today. There is also important background in terms of Jesus's own ministry. He would have been very well-known amongst Jews coming in from the north, around the area of Galilee, where he had performed amazing miracles, many healing miracles and had spoken to large crowds. His teaching and healing ministry had made him very popular, especially with the poor as his teaching seemed to promise them, well literally the kingdom of heaven (Luke 20; Matt 5:3) and give them hope in a way other teachers did not. The Jewish authorities whom Jesus was now coming directly to confront at the Temple itself had been monitoring his activities for some time and were angry at his breaking of basic rules and his criticism of them, but also at his rising popularity which they saw as threatening their authority and potentially risking a Roman crackdown if Jesus's ministry inspired a rebellion.

The last straw for them was ironically Jesus's raising of Lazarus from the dead at Bethany, a village just a hop skip and a jump away from Jerusalem. This had boosted Jesus's reputation so much and there was so much talk of it in Jerusalem that the authorities decided they had to have Jesus eliminated before things got entirely outside their control.

So this is the beginning of a week which involved a lot of intrigue and plotting, culminating in their finding a disciple, Judas Iscariot, to betray Jesus's location at a quiet spot away from the crowds, where they could send in a snatch squad to arrest him. This happened in the very early hours of Friday morning, followed by the mock trial before the high priest, the interrogation by Pontius Pilate and the push to have Jesus executed before the Passover Sabbath on Friday. It's a momentous week to commemorate and understand for us as Christians.

So let's go back to the start of the week, where we are now, and the strange picture we have described in the passage read today. Jesus has arranged for a young donkey, a donkey colt to be borrowed. It's an odd thing to do. Donkeys are not normally ridden by adults, but by children at the seaside perhaps (I've only been on one at Blackpool as a child). They are small but strong, often used in poor countries for carrying loads or pulling carts (Johanna and I saw them used like this in Africa a few weeks ago), but they are too small for riding around on. And the colt of a donkey? Well, sorry if this image sticks in your head too much, as it now does in mine, but one Christian commentator says that Jesus riding the colt of a donkey would make him look like a grown up on a small child's bike!! What was that all about!?

Well, there is a prophecy in the book of **Zechariah (chapter 9, verse 9)**, just a few pages from the end of the OT in your Bibles, that Jerusalem's king will come to it, **"righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey"**. It's a strange prophecy, as it mentions peace being proclaimed, but also the Lord appearing with acts of power and destruction to save his people. Whatever the meaning of the wider prophecy, it is clearly connected with the coming of the Messiah, the anointed one, seen as the saviour of the Jewish nation. Jesus clearly wanted to give a signal by choosing to arrive in this way. And his disciples were super-excited about being part of this.

Coming in on the road from Bethany, there was probably a tent city as you came down from the Mount of Olives towards the eastern side of Jerusalem, with thousands of people arriving for the Passover festival, but too poor to afford the exorbitant price of staying in digs in the city itself. When the message spread that Jesus was coming into the City, large crowds gathered along the roadside. Some marked their respect for him by throwing cloaks down on the road before him and also palm leaves, which some would probably also have been waving to welcome him. (That's why of course that this is called "Palm Sunday".)

The group of disciples who were walking in with him called out loud praises - **"Hosanna"** - and verses from the Psalms : **"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord"**. No doubt the wider crowd joined in.

Who did Jesus think he was!! With all this commotion around him. The thought police of the time, who seemed to keep a close eye on Jesus, the Pharisees, had people in the crowd who told Jesus to stop this, *using this kind of language about Jesus!* But what did he answer? **Verse 40 – I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.**

Who did Jesus think he was indeed? Yes, **KING**. He had started his ministry three years before saying, ***The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news*** (Mark 1:15). He had been talking about the good news of the kingdom ever since, because he said (Luke 4: 43) ***“that is why I was sent”***.

There are well over 100 times in the four Gospels when Jesus refers to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven or just the kingdom that he is announcing and describing. Much of it is in the form of parables and stories which are not always easy to understand and put together. But it's coming is clearly Jesus's main message. Just a few examples. The first line of the Sermon on the Mount: ***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*** (Matthew 5:3; see also Luke 6:20). It comes at the beginning of the Lord's prayer: ***“your kingdom come”***. When Jesus speaks privately to Nicodemus in John chapter 3, it is about what is necessary to see the kingdom of God or enter into the kingdom of God.

Jesus has been very sparing in his ministry so far, first as to making it plain that he is the Messiah in terms of Old Testament prophecy and Jewish expectation of a saviour. Now, he is making it clear that in relation to the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God that he has preached about for many months, he is not only inaugurating it, bringing it about, ***but is the king of it*** too! Just pause for thought on that.

In John's Gospel, the conversation the following Friday morning between Pontius Pilate and Jesus is recorded. Jesus is asked whether he is putting himself up as the king of the Jews, as the Jewish authorities are complaining he is, as a threat to Roman rule. Jesus does not deny that he is king, but says that ***“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place”***. Jesus came into the world to show what's true, he says. (John 18:36-37). Pilate does not understand what Jesus is saying other than realising he is no threat to him. He takes the view that Jesus, whatever kind of king he thinks he is, is not the kind a Roman governor needs to be afraid of. He and then the soldiers who come to torture him just use this claim of Jesus to be a subject of mockery. As you will remember, the soldiers, torturing him, force a crown of thorns on his head and dress him up in a purple robe to make fun of him. Pontius Pilate insists on annoying the Jewish authorities by putting a sign up on Jesus's Crucifix to say that Jesus is “the King of the Jews” (John 19.19 -21).

So do you see? By riding on a little donkey at the beginning of the week and by bizarre events at the end of it, in a topsy turvy way, Jesus is established as ***king***. Not actually king of the Jews, ***but King in the kingdom of heaven. King in the kingdom of God.***

Can we get our minds round that? I'd not really put things together in that way before, but the privilege of being asked to speak at a service focuses the mind and helps things gel. Can you see what an amazing thing is happening here?!

At the beginning of the last sermon series on prayer, Jeremy set us this verse from Jesus's sermon on the mount as one to ponder over and apply in our own lives:

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6: 33). "Seek first his kingdom!"

Do we know what you are seeking? We are hardly likely to find something if we don't know what we are looking for! Surely we need to do our best to understand what Jesus meant by the kingdom and what it means for him to be king. Many of you do know ... whether you have articulated it in this way or not. It's not a kingdom of taxes, rules and regulations, but of values instilled in us by the Holy Spirit -values which we must show in our actions: love, humility, kindness, patience, unselfishness, suffering for others, faithfulness, gentleness.... I would love for us to unpack the teaching on the kingdom more, perhaps in a new sermon series?

I believe the way Jesus chose to enter into Jerusalem at the beginning of this fateful week illustrated the strangeness of his kingship. Although he was fulfilling an old prophecy from Zechariah, the picture of him on a small donkey coming along with people waving palm leaves was at least a bit ridiculous. It was a contrast with, and a parody of, what was going on at the other side of town, quite possibly at the same time, with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, coming up on the west side of Jerusalem (from his coastal base) through the posher suburbs of Jerusalem where the high priest and other Jewish elders lived, in a long procession of troops with their gleaming weapons and armour and banners, horses and chariots, representing the dominance of the Roman Empire even at this local gathering of Jews for their Passover festival.

In a number of ways, Jesus continued in the course of this crucial week to show that his kingdom is an upside-down kingdom, even in ways that his own disciples had not yet fully grasped. So let me finally just turn to one event of this week which illustrates this probably more than anything.

On the Thursday evening, just before the last supper, John's Gospel, chapter 13, records that Jesus did something which was shocking to even his closest disciples. He acted as only the lowliest non-Jewish slave could be made to act and washed his disciples' feet, feet that, covered at most by sandals, would have been filthy from all the dust and animal droppings that would have filled the streets, especially at this Passover time. It was an astounding act of humility.

Jesus then said this: ***"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, not is a messenger greater than one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them"* (John 13: 15-17).**

This is love in action. This is how we must seek and be part of Jesus kingdom. Amen.