

PALM SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2024 9:15 & 11:00am

So here we are at the beginning of Holy Week, which always starts with the familiar story of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Most of us here probably know the story of what happened. But what is its significance and what can we learn from it?

Let's start then to explore it together.

Right from the start, with the story of getting the colt of a donkey, the focus in Mark's account of the triumphal entry is the sovereign authority of Jesus. He tells his disciples exactly what to do. They obey him and things turn out exactly as he said.

The entry into Jerusalem marks the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly life. Within five days, he would be dead. He knew what was coming. The week would hold no surprises for him. But through it all, he was in complete control.

Even when things looked out of control – the arrest, the flogging, the mocking, the terrible crucifixion and even at the moment of his death, when he gave up his spirit, Jesus was the one in authority, not those who plotted to bring about his death.

John's gospel tells us that Jesus laid down his life of his own accord. No-one takes it from me – I have the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again.

And here in this story that authority is evident.

So, the disciples threw their cloaks on the donkey and Jesus sat on it and began to ride towards Jerusalem.

Now, in riding a donkey, Jesus was coming in a royal way.

Because a donkey in Old Testament literature was not just a humble pack animal as perhaps we might think – it was a princely mount .

But it was a symbol of wealth and position, not military might and Jesus rode a donkey to emphasise that the sovereign authority that he had rested not on armed force but on his ability, and his alone, to establish the kingdom of God and a reign of universal peace.

Now a crowd had gathered around him. Mark doesn't mention this, but John's gospel does – it refers to a great crowd that had come up for the feast and many of them had doubtless seen and heard Jesus in Galilee, and now they seemed to welcome an opportunity to acclaim him.

They spread their cloaks on the road – an Old Testament sign of kingship – and some went ahead of him and some followed him, waving branches saying 'Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord', blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.

And this is a reference to the Messianic kingdom promised to David's son (2 Samuel 7:11-14)

It was all very exciting, joyful and full of hope.

I'm sure the disciples hoped that this was the beginning of a new era when Jesus would act in a sovereign way to free the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors and deliver them into a kingdom of beauty, justice and peace.

I'm sure the people hoped for the same. They had after all been promised a Messiah and at last it seemed they had found him.

And indeed they had found him, and he would indeed deliver them – but not in anything like the way they expected.

The sovereign way of God, it seems, turns worldly wisdom on its head. Lowliness is the hallmark of conquest, suffering and humiliation is pathway to victory and ignominious death gives birth to life in all its fulness.

But that was still to come. Here on the Mount of Olives, they were acclaiming Jesus.

They had seen him at work. They knew that he understood them.

When he'd moved about among them, he saw the bleak landscape of poverty so many of them lived in.

He saw the pits of injustice so many of them had fallen into because they had been exploited by others.

And he did something about it.

He was full of compassion for them and so he fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he gave back to a grief-stricken widow her only

son by raising him from the dead, he rescued a wretched woman caught in the act of adultery who would have been stoned to death if it had not been for him.

He was God in human form and the embodiment of love and that was why the ordinary people were drawn to him and why they saw that he had an authority in his teaching and his actions which the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law— the religious rulers - did not have.

And as the story moves on, and Jesus enters Jerusalem, and he goes to the temple courts because he has work to do there

But it is too late in the day, so they go to Bethany and come back the next day. And when he arrives at the temple, he sees what a mockery those same religious rulers had made of it.

Because they had allowed it to become a market place, full of people buying selling and changing money, and we can take it from the reference to a den of robbers that they were ripping people off right left and centre.

And righteous anger rises in Jesus and his sovereign authority comes into play again here and he clears them out of the temple courts, overturning the money tables and benches and stopping people from carrying merchandise through.

This was the last straw for the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.

They had no doubt witnessed the triumphal entry and they didn't like it one bit.

They didn't like Jesus anyway. And they were of course always looking over their shoulders at the Roman occupiers who wouldn't take kindly to anyone but Caesar claiming to be a king. When the teachers of the Law looked at Jesus, they saw a law-breaker, a rebel, a trouble maker.

When Jesus looked at the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, he saw the zeal with which they rigidly and ruthlessly applied the Jewish Law and he saw how it sometimes broke people instead of bringing life. And he challenged and criticised them for it. And they didn't like that either.

He had come to change the way things were done. And they didn't like that at all.

And they were outraged when he taught them and said – 'Is it not written – My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'

They will have recognised the scripture that Jesus was quoting about God's house of prayer from Isaiah (56:7)– and they thought they were already doing it. The Gentiles had a court didn't they – what more did they want?

Well yes, they did, but it was right on the margins of the temple and it had been given over to dishonest commerce. How could they possibly pray there?

Here was this upstart preacher – a nobody, as far as the teachers of the law were concerned, literally dismantling the structures they had set up, criticising them and standing up for the Gentiles.

And they were scandalised by Him.

But I think that Jesus here is foreshadowing the liberty of access to God for everyone – Jews and Gentiles alike – which he is about to accomplish and deliver. Salvation which is oh so very costly to him, but joyously free to all who put their trust in him

As Paul was later to write: ‘Christ is the end of the law,’ that is, the culmination of the law. And his death and resurrection would usher in an entirely new age of love and justice, freedom and peace with God.

And I also think that one of the things going on in this cleansing of the temple is connected with what is about to happen to the temple veil on Good Friday, which would symbolise this unprecedented access to God.

The temple veil was a very thick, heavy and richly embroidered curtain which screened from public view a room in the temple called the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place, God’s dwelling place on earth.

This was the most sacred place in the world to the Jewish people, because God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses had promised to dwell there.

Only the High Priest could step behind the veil, and even then, only once a year, and never without carrying sacrificial blood to make atonement for the sins of the people.

And yet on Good Friday, this thick and heavy veil would be torn in two from top to bottom, exposing that holiest of places to the gaze of all.

And I think Jesus is here preparing the way for this. Clearing out all the grubby self-serving commerce, representing perhaps the way of worldly wisdom, so that the way is clean, clear and open for the plan of God's wisdom to unfold, where all people – Gentiles and Jews alike – are invited to come and pray and experience God for themselves, with the temple veil hanging limp, torn and redundant.

When that eventually happened, it was a scandal of epic proportions to the Pharisees and teachers of law. That anyone but the High Priest should see within the veil was utterly appalling, because the Law laid out very clearly how it all should be.

But this tearing of the veil was a symbolic statement, speaking far more eloquently than ever words could, demonstrating that the way to God is open.

And the law you operate under now is that of grace. You can all – every one of you, no matter who you are or where you come from – you can all draw near and you don't need to obey lists of rules and regulations to be acceptable to God. All you need to be received, welcomed and loved, is simple humble faith.

Nothing to pay for, nothing to earn, nothing you have to become. Just be yourself – that is enough.

That was the message that Jesus through his death and resurrection was about to proclaim to everyone.

And we here are, the blessed recipients of all the benefits of so great a salvation.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law didn't know that – and most of them wouldn't have had ears to hear it anyway.

They just saw Jesus as trouble - one huge bundle of trouble and stress that had to be sorted and sorted now. And the only way to sort him was to kill him and get him out of the way forever.

They managed to contrive the first bit – he was dead within five days.

But the second bit – get him out of the way forever – well, they singularly failed there.

And even in the act contriving his death, what they did, without realising it, was to be part of bringing history to a point where the floodgates of God's mercy opened and, slightly to expand the hymn, streams of mercy, grace, freedom and pure love poured incessant from above. And they're still pouring two thousand years on.

And today on Palm Sunday we stand with Jesus on the brink of these momentous events unfolding.

So, when you take your palm cross home, remember this every time you look at it – mercy, grace, freedom – and wisdom and hope – the list just goes on – they are all still pouring

Over you and over me.

All the time.

Here indeed is love vast as the ocean. What can we do but respond with humble and grateful hearts? Amen.

Psalm 118:19-29

- ¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.
- ²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
- ²³ the LORD has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
- ²⁵ LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.^[b]
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up^[c] to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
- ²⁹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Mark 11:1-18 Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!^[a]"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"^[b]

¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree and Clears the Temple Courts

¹² The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'^[c]? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'^[d]"

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.