

Mark 11: 1-11

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”

On the first Palm Sunday Jesus went on a journey into Jerusalem and today we have been on a journey today albeit the distance from the Tradesman’s Homes to here is a little less than that of the final part of Jesus’ journey on that day from Bethany to Jerusalem. The temperature this morning will have been slightly lower than that encountered by Jesus.

There is a massive amount both said and unsaid in this morning’s reading from Mark. In many ways many of us here this morning probably miss out by not being aware of the unsaid background to the words that we read.

To the accountant our reading can be taken as being about taxation although that word is not mentioned at all. To the politician it can be taken as a reading about both national and local politics but those words are not mentioned at all. To the Old Testament scholars Jesus it can be taken that Jesus was fulfilling prophesy.

To us the reading is about Jesus showing his love for the world. It is also about our response to Jesus. Is Jesus our King for seven days per week or is he only our King on a Sunday? The crowds cheered him on his journey to Jerusalem but just five days later they yelled “Crucify him” Do we ever act in a similar fashion? Do we praise Jesus on a Sunday but forget him during the week? Do we cheer him on a Sunday but then not do his will during Monday to Saturday. Is Jesus our greatest treasure?

So what is Palm Sunday about? Why is Palm Sunday so significant? What was so significant to the people? Why does the Gospel of Mark focus in the way that it does?

The first ten Chapters of Mark tell the story of Jesus up to his final week, the remainder of Mark spotlights this final “Passion” Week. Obviously the other Gospel writers all include this week as well but Mark, perhaps, gives the greatest focus to it. In Chapter 8 Jesus told the disciples he would soon suffer, be killed and rise again. In Chapter 9 this warning is repeated and in Chapter 10 Jesus states it again “We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles”

This was the busiest week of the year in Jerusalem. The people were preparing for Passover. They were flocking into Jerusalem to get ready for the big day. The Romans were on full alert ready for crowd trouble. Pilate made a point of riding into Jerusalem from his palace by the coast each year on this day together with a legion of soldiers to take charge of proceedings. Jesus carefully chose the timing and method of his arrival to coincide with this.

So Jesus sends two of his disciples We are not told which two were sent but it is obvious that this visit to Jerusalem had been carefully planned. The disciples were given precise instructions on what to do and on how to do it. Jesus had also chosen to start this part of his

journey in a place where he was disliked intensely by the religious authorities but loved by the people because of the miracles he had previously performed there.

So the disciples do as instructed and find him the colt. A colt was a baby donkey that had never been ridden. Matthew says the disciples brought the colt's mother as well. We don't see many donkeys on the streets of Manningham although we do tend to see them at the seaside. In Bridlington we see colts being trained by Chris the donkey man. It takes time before children are let near them as the animals need time to adjust to being with people.

In first Century Israel a donkey was seen as an important animal. They were often connected with nobility and even with royalty whereas we tend to think of donkeys as being solely for children's rides. According to Old Testament guidelines if an animal was to be used for a sacred purpose it must never have been used for a different purpose. This colt had never been used and this journey by Jesus was for a sacred purpose.

People spread their cloaks in the street, they waved branches and they shouted Hosanna. The people came out to hail Jesus. They understand that this journey into Jerusalem is special. They might not know why but something is happening. Most folk at that time will not have had a wardrobe full of cloaks, this was their only cloak. This was BIG. It would perhaps be a once in a lifetime event normally reserved for celebrating military victories,

People placed branches on the ground, these would be leafy branches. John calls them palm branches hence the name Palm Sunday. Others shouted "Hosanna, Blessed to he who comes in the name of the Lord, Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna means "Save Now."

Mark refers specifically to those who were in front of Jesus and to those who were behind him. This suggests some sort of chant between them. The chant is actually a quotation from Psalm 118 predicting that someone is coming in the Lord's name who will demonstrate the Lord's authority and power.

What did the crowd think as they spread their cloaks, as they placed their branches and as they shouted "Save Now"? Why five days later did they cry "Crucify Him" and ask for Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus?

The people hated paying taxes, we in Bradford love to pay taxes don't we. The people hated the Roman's. They thought the Messiah would save them from Rome. Jesus though had not come to save them from Rome but rather he had come to save all of us from our sins.

Jesus was presenting himself as a King on that Sunday. By riding down from the Mount of Olives on a colt he was fulfilling a prophecy that all Jewish people had learned in their cradles. A prophecy from Zechariah made over 500 years earlier "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Jesus is declaring in public that he is the Messiah but he does so without using words, he does so by his actions. He is forcing people to make a decision about him, whether that be the crowd or whether it be the authorities. But he is doing so on his terms. The people in the streets had a particular expectation of Jesus. What is our expectation of Jesus? Do we want Jesus to save us from the problems of life, from illness, from debt, from bullying, from all and sundry because he won't. What Jesus does do is to save us from our sin. Jesus said to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world" If we want saving from the problems of this world then we are in the wrong place. Instead Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many. The world said no to Jesus but God says yes and raises him back to life on Easter Sunday.

Having arrived in Jerusalem Jesus went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late he went out to Bethany with the twelve. The inference is that the temple was deserted, nobody was there. After that ceremonious journey he seems, almost, to turn tail and leave without doing anything.

He went to the temple..... Once again Jesus puts God's house at the centre. He looks at everything. There was a lot to look at. Mark tells us that when Jesus returned the next day the first thing he did was to throw the traders and moneychangers out so it seems in looking he saw things he did not like.

He left the temple and went to Bethany. The temple was meant to be a place of worship and prayer but Jesus felt unable to do that. This was the place where sacrifices were made but five days later Jesus would himself be the sacrifice. Five days later the temple veil would be torn in two. Not many years later the temple itself would be torn down. God's people would soon have a new temple, God's people would be that temple. Seven days later would come resurrection.

The people thought they wanted someone to save them from the Romans but that was not what they needed. Our greatest need is often not what we think we want. Jesus came to Jerusalem and he went straight to the temple, he set about sorting the temple out, he did not set about sorting out the Romans. The people wanted him to sort the Romans but that was not what they needed.

We all need to be right with God. We need God's forgiveness. We need to listen to God. We need to speak with God. That is what the temple was meant to provide in Jerusalem but it did not. When he threw the traders and moneychangers out Jesus said "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations". Sadly that is not what the temple had become.

When we respond to Jesus he answers our needs and the needs of others. For many people he is not what they want but he is what they need. Can we help people to see their need? Can we help people to recognise and respond to Jesus this Easter?

Amen