

*St. Aidan's West Epping, Palm Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2019*

**“WHO IS THIS MAN?” (Luke 19:28-40)**

**(Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-18; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:20-32)**

Who is this man? That question would have been raised by many people as Jesus rode towards Jerusalem on a young donkey, with crowds celebrating his coming. Some in the crowd would really have had no idea about him. Others recognized him as the teacher and miracle-worker from up north in Galilee. The pilgrims coming from Galilee and the Jordan Valley probably had seen much more of Jesus than the people of Jerusalem. And many of those pilgrims would have been the ones who joined the apostles in hailing Jesus as “the king who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Luke has spent ten chapters with Jesus making his last great journey to Jerusalem. Of course he had been there a number of times before, from early childhood; and the religious elite, the Pharisees, together with the leaders of Jerusalem who controlled the temple and its worship, were only too aware of Jesus. They knew him as someone who challenged them and their system, and rejected much of their understanding of the scriptures. Some of them were already looking for a way to get rid of this troublemaker.

But here is Jesus on a young donkey. He had probably arranged in advance for the animal to be ready for him, but when the disciples saw what Jesus was going to do, they wanted to honour him in a special way. Before Jesus got on, they put their cloaks on the donkey to honour him and to make it clear that this man was someone special. Perhaps other disciples threw their cloaks on the road for Jesus to ride over, and people in the crowd started to do the same thing. It was a red carpet welcome, almost like a ticker-tape parade. Many already knew Jesus as someone quite unique: could it be that he really was the Messiah, the promised king and Saviour?

And as the procession moves forward, the people sing one of the Psalms traditionally sung by pilgrims on the way up to Jerusalem. But at least some of them are singing not just “Blessed is the **one** who comes in the name of the Lord”: they are singing “Blessed is **the king** who comes in the name of the Lord.” They are describing Jesus as the king, coming to the city of the great king. And Jesus is happy to accept their praise, for he is indeed the great king, the Son of David as well as the Son of God.

But how many people realized that he was a **particular** kind of king? He hadn't borrowed a great **horse**, one which could be used as a war-horse. He had borrowed a young colt that had never been ridden. In fact the other Gospels tell us that it was a donkey, not a horse at all. A king who was a military conqueror would certainly come on a great horse, but Jesus is coming in peace. No doubt Jesus is thinking of a passage from the Book of the prophet Zechariah which speaks of a triumphant king who comes humbly riding on a donkey: on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Jesus is that king, fulfilling that prophecy.

Jesus is indeed the Messiah, but his royal mission is not to raise a military force or to overthrow the Romans. He has a very different purpose: one which is rightly summed up by some of the words that the crowd were singing: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven”. He has come to glorify the Lord and to establish the peace of God's kingdom. What the joyful crowd do not realize is that peace will come at the price of terrible suffering.

Some of the Pharisees want Jesus to stop the crowds praising him like that. They represent Jerusalem in its resistance to Jesus, and they fail to see that they have misunderstood who Jesus really is. But one way or another, Jesus **must** be acknowledged at this time: if those praises of the crowds were to be stopped, the stones themselves would cry out in praise.

If we were to read on in Luke we would immediately hear Jesus' tragic words as he weeps over Jerusalem: Jerusalem is failing to recognize the way to peace. True peace will not come by trying to overthrow the Romans. Nor will it come by tolerating the Roman occupiers and living co-operatively with them. True peace will come through humble repentance, and openness to the healing that Jesus has come to bring.

Our reading from John's Gospel tells of some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. Yes, even foreigners used to come to the great Passover festival! But would Jesus want to meet with Gentiles at a time like this? John doesn't actually tell us that he spoke to the Greeks, but I imagine that he did.

John wants to tell us the significance of these visitors. To Jesus they are a sign that the hour has indeed come for the Son of Man to be glorified. The king who had come in peace was coming to bring people to God, and to bring people together. He had not come to get nation fighting against nation: he had come to bring God's peace to the world, not just Israel but all people – both Jews and Gentiles.

But this glorious outcome will come at great cost. As a grain of wheat must be buried, apparently dying in order to bear fruit, so Jesus must die in order to bring that wonderful peace to the world. And he warns his followers that they must be prepared to follow him even if it means giving up their lives. For this is the way to true life.

So here is this humble King and Saviour, the bringer of peace, preparing to challenge the people of Jerusalem to open up to the peace which God offers. Of course Jesus knows that he and his message will be rejected by the powerbrokers, that he will suffer terribly and die, but that he will also rise triumphant over death itself. As the king of peace, he will indeed bring peace to those who will receive it.

That famous passage from Philippians is a fitting reading for today, as it brings Paul's answer to that question: "Who is this man?" Jesus the Messiah is God himself, humbling himself to share our human life, coming to us as a servant, and obeying his divine call even to the point of dying that horrific death on the cross. Jesus' humble obedience leads to his triumphant resurrection, and to the recognition that he is indeed Lord. And one day, says Paul, all people will recognize that divine authority of Jesus.

So today we gather to praise Jesus as the humble Messiah, the bringer of peace with God. He calls us to walk humbly with him, to be where he is, to take up our cross and follow him. That is the way to true peace and to true glory. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*