

28 March 2021

St George's 8.30am, 10.15am

Auckland (Mark 11:1- 11, Zechariah 9:9; Luke 15:17-22)

## **Palm Sunday: When Love Comes to Town**

### **Introduction**

One of the challenges of marriage is what do you buy your partner for Christmas or her birthday that you've never bought her before and will surprise and delight. Give me a Bunnings or a Mitre 10 voucher and I am deliriously happy and thank the Lord for giving me someone as loving as Karen – but I have found, to my surprise, that vouchers, or for that matter World Vision goats and toilets don't elicit quite the same swelling of the bosom and declarations of undying love when presented to Karen.

To this day – my best ever present was when we lived in Hawke's Bay and I had exhausted all the presents ideas for Karen that I really wanted – chain saw, weed eater, back pack sprayer ... so I decided on a sure fire winner - the boys aged 7 and 8 at the time thought it was a stunning idea – and so we all headed off, with a large sack and with great excitement to a neighbouring farm and presented Karen with ... Piggy Muldoon. Karen was so overcome with emotion ...

Trying to find a new angle on a birthday present is a bit like Palm Sunday – the first time you hear it is a magical story – full of drama – donkey's, excited crowds, palm fronds and a temple sacking, but by the time you have heard it 30, 40, 50 times, all the drama's gone and preachers are forced to find all sorts of new angles to make it fresh.

But the story came alive to me with a fresh energy when I visited Jerusalem and walked from the Mount of Olives into the city retracing much of the route that Jesus would have taken.

- Sits high on a plateau between the Mediterranean and Dead Sea
- One of the oldest cities in the world
- Holy to three major religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam
- Destroyed at least twice, besieged 23 times
- Walled city – the latest walls dating back to mid 16<sup>th</sup> century
- King David conquered the city and established it as the capital of a united Israel and his son Solomon built the temple
- Nehemiah rebuilt its walls
- Hezekiah built an elaborate underground water system
- 8 enormous gates – 4 are positioned to align with the major points on the compass while the 8<sup>th</sup> gate is currently sealed until the arrival of the Messiah
- While today it's a religious flashpoint and young 18 year old soldiers prevent any religious assembly, it is easy to imagine it in the days of Jesus

And it was through the eighth gate, the Golden Gate, that Jesus enters the City of Jerusalem, acknowledges that indeed he is the longed for Messiah and encounters a city in fervour:

### **What would he have seen:**

Jerusalem was packed. Passover week and the walled town is filled to capacity with as many as 2.7 million pilgrims in a town that normally holds 300,000 at a squeeze.

Everywhere there would have been noise, water is at a premium and for many pilgrims there is their first time visiting the famous city

So there is a real carnival atmosphere - and as the donkey picks it way down the narrow streets that lead from the Mount of Olives and through the giant gates into Jerusalem the excitement builds to fever pitch.

their king was coming home, coming home to liberate them from Roman Occupation – the embodiment of the long promised and hoped for Messiah.

They had never lost hope. They were God's chosen people but the prophets had been silent for 500 years – until the strange man of the desert – John the Baptist began speaking of a Messiah here and now.

God had heard their cry – how long Lord? And they were witnesses to history.

Just a few days earlier Jesus had raised a man named Lazarus from the dead.

And he was choosing the Passover to enter the city – the most sacred of the religious festivals.

And for the disciples at least – it appeared their master was finally reconciled to his Messiahship – previously he appeared to deny his Messiahship or at the very least being embarrassed by it – now it seemed he was willing or at least reconciled to it

As he enters the city – the cripple calls out “to the son of David”, addresses him as the Messiah and, for once, Jesus does not silence him

And the crowd recognise the sign. It had been prophesized 100s of years earlier by the prophet Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly o daughter of Zion

Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem

Lo your king comes to you

Triumphant and victorious is he

Humble and riding on an ass

On a colt the foal of an ass

Like King David, 1000 years earlier, Jesus too is entering the city on a donkey – announcing his kingship.

And they start calling:

Hosanna – literally God Saves

Quote from the Psalms “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”

When challenged by the Pharisees – he says “you may be able to shut up the crowds but then the stones on the side of the road will shout it out”.

**And now, finally it is starting to make sense:**

Jesus kingship slowly being revealed:

- Triumphal announcement of his birth by a legion of angels to the shepherds
- Jesus receives his divine anointing at his baptism by John when the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove
- Proceeds to demonstrate his authority as Messiah:
  - Battles Satan in the desert
  - Binds the strong man – victory over evil spirits
  - Preaching and Teaching
  - Healings and Exorcisms
  - Mount of Transfiguration

And it doesn't stop there – the old prophesies seem to be coming alive:

The next day he enters the temple and cleanses it – this is not the act of a petulant leader but rather he is asserting his right to govern the temple – it is his house.

Now we know that in just a few hours and days things will start unravelling dramatically and the crowd that sing “Hosanna” will soon shout “Crucify him” – but for now I want to leave the story as Jesus enters the city to shouts of acclaim.

## **Application**

For many in the crowd this was their first encounter with Jesus – They’d heard the stories, might even have known people who were there when Jesus raised preached and healed, but today was the first time many people had set eyes on him.

**Think back to when you first encountered Jesus and it started to make sense.**

In my own case it was a 14 year old at a Youth For Christ rally in Christchurch 25 February 1978. A Canadian Will Ruler was speaking:

- God loved me and had a wonderful plan for my life
- I am a sinner and separated from God so cannot fully experience and know God’s love in my life
- Jesus sacrificial death on the cross is the only answer
- I must receive Jesus Christ into my life to be fully reconciled to God by praying the sinner’s prayer.

Don’t think I was particularly troubled by my sinful state - at the age of 14 most sins are of anticipation rather than realisation.

But I felt compelled to go forward and something happened that night which forever changed my life.

At the time I thought it was the only gate to faith – the thought that if I was the only sinner in the world, Jesus would have died for me. I was deeply troubled that others did not seem to know this. I quickly learnt the lexicon – born again, penal substitution, sin, grace.

But I saw faith in purely personal terms. The sense that God loved the whole world (and not just me, and not just humanity) did not figure in my thinking for some time to come.

But just as Jerusalem has many gates into the city – slowly I am starting to appreciate there are many gates through which people come to faith – all of which involve an encounter with Jesus:

1. **Gate of Community** – deep sense of wanting to belong to something greater than myself
2. **Gate of Social Justice and Service** – where a passion for social justice and service causes you to reflect that transformation must involve a change of heart
3. **Gate of Deliverance** – where the chains that bind us, the principalities and powers are broken by the transforming love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit
4. **Gate of Healing and the Miraculous** – where freedom
5. **Suffering Gate** – identification with the suffering servant who endured for our sakes
6. **Forgiveness Gate** – chains of unforgiveness are broken – forever.

For much of my early Christian walk I only knew one gate and viewed with great suspicion others who did not profess my confession.

In fact much of the sectarianism and denominationalism that we see reflected in Christendom is when people claim their particular gate is the only way to encounter Jesus. It certainly helped explain some of the antagonism between Christian Union and Student Christian Movement.

### **Marker Posts of Faith**

While there are many gates and while no two faith journeys are exactly alike, there are some common marker posts along the way, irrespective of which gate you enter through:

The challenge of describing the indescribable is that we so quickly resort to cliché : eg giant God shaped hole in my heart

- **Transformation of the Mind** -
- **Transformation of the Heart** – a deliberate turning around and confession of sins and the acceptance we are forgiven
- **Transformation of the Head, Heart and Hands** - reorientation of life towards the pursuit of truth and a response to the call of God
- **The Sacramental** – involves water baptism
- **The Charismatic** – involves the appropriation of the gifts of the spirit
- **The Communal** – incorporation into the faith community

Traditional evangelism emphasizes a particular point of conversion – a date or time.

Corporate and cosmic aspect of salvation

### **All gates lead to the Cross**

But – through whichever gate we enter – all gates lead to the Cross.

Any gate that does not lead to and beyond the Cross is a counterfeit gate. You see the Cross is the one unavoidable reality.

In Luke we read that Jesus ‘set his face for Jerusalem’. And his message increasingly emphasized the costly nature of discipleship:

- Foxes have holes but the son of Man will have nowhere to lay his head
- Discipleship is an act of obedience and at times the Lord will lead us to places we do not want to go

Our understanding of the atonement really matters. The gate through which I entered presented the atonement in a very monochromatic way – salvation was essentially personal - did not

easily explain the cosmic nature of salvation – God so loved the world.

What is the central message of the Cross – it is simply this: we cannot save ourselves. But Jesus does.

Whether we have known Jesus for years, or like the two Greeks who call out to Philip “Sir we would see Jesus”. Like every King – we are called to follow him:

- To live our lives in obedience to the one who flung stars into space and then to cruel nails surrendered;
- To live our lives as a daily offering – in homage to the King

To live our lives in worship to the Servant King - Hosanna – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

### **Personal Challenge**

Traditionally Lent is a time for spiritual spring cleaning – when we reflect on the health of our spiritual walk.

1. Through which gate did Jesus first enter your life?
2. Have you been open to exploring other gates?
3. How do you respond to others who entered via a different gate?
4. For many, conversion is accompanied by moments of great peace and joy so:
5. When did you last allow God to surprise you
6. When did you last experience the infilling of the Holy Spirit
7. When was the last act of obedience

David prays restore to me the joy of my salvation. Perhaps it is time to utter a similar prayer.

And for some among us – perhaps we have been content to observe the crowd – even as we intermingled among them – adopting the language and customs of the crowd and to all appearances part of

the crowd, but in our hearts we know like the Golden gate – we've kept that gate firmly shut.

Each one of us will at some time in our life face our own Palm Sunday – when we have the choice to pick up the fronds and bow down to the coming King.

Through which ever gate Jesus enters your Jerusalem – there is a deep sense of having allowed our hand to slip from the hand of God and a deep yearning to turn towards home and into the arms of the father.

If that is you – consider our second gospel reading today:

It is the best articulation of the gospel that I know:

- every day the Father scanned the horizon, endured the scorn and ridicule of the crowd ...
- And the prepared speech of the lost son evaporated – in the face of the love of the Father.

Maybe the fresh encounter that Palm Sunday offers is not a new abstraction or metaphor – but something far more – the chance of a personal encounter with the Lord and with it a commitment to journey to and beyond the cross.

Maybe now is the time when you allow love to come to your town.

We're Anglicans – so we would never be so bold – but I do urge you if you sense the Lord is speaking to you – don't sit on it – come forward at communion and allow God to minister to you and do tell someone!