

SERMON - PALM SUNDAY 2024

So as I've come to re-visit this very provocative entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on the donkey, I have two main starting reflections.

Firstly, without question, this is a pivotal moment in Jesus' life and ministry.

It's the moment that triggers all the events of Holy Week. It sets into motion all the denials, betrayals, plots to accuse and ultimately, plans to execute Jesus. It's no exaggeration to say that this entrance, triggers a chain of events that will have life changing and eternal consequences for humanity. Because it sets in motion the events that lead to the Cross and Resurrection. And these have life changing eternal consequences.

And the second reflection I have, is this. **Palm Sunday is the culmination of a collision that was always going to happen. Why do I say this?**

Because it's the culmination of a clash between 2 kingdom ways. Two completely different ways of what it means to be human. And when Jesus makes the decision to enter on a donkey, this is yet another powerful statement by Jesus about these two different kingdom ways of what it means to live as humanity.

The Way of the donkey versus the way of the warhorse.

The way of peace versus the way of fear and coercive power.

The way of the servant heart versus the way of the self-serving heart.

So make no mistake, this is Jesus entering the lion's den. **Why do I call Jerusalem the lion's den?** Because this is the very heart (the bastion) of all the corrupt, self-serving powers and dominions, that have tried to oppose, undermine, threaten, and even silence Jesus.

I believe that what we witness in this entrance by Jesus, is one of THE defining characteristics of Jesus whole life and ministry and without it things would be very different.

But if we want to understand the full scope of this defining characteristic of Jesus, we need to fully understand the **back story** that leads to this provocative entrance into Jerusalem.

Which is why I've picked these 2 gospel readings for today.

Chapter 9 and chapter 19 give us two pivotal moments in Jesus' journey to the Cross.

Chapter 19 is Jesus entering the lion's den of Jerusalem, but the really telling moment in the back story happens in chapter 9 verse 51 when we read this.

⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Or as the King James translation puts it... Jesus steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, *Resolute* comes from the same Latin verb *resolve*. So Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem with a **steadfast, determined, unwavering resolve.**

Why is this so telling? Because in chapter 9 v 22 some 29 verses earlier in the back story we read Jesus telling his disciples this.

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, (the religious authorities) and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” This is why the back story and context counts.

Something very significant is being revealed here about the character of Jesus.

Even *before*, He resolutely sets his face to go to Jerusalem, he's telling his disciples, **he will be rejected, and he will be killed.**

In fact, Jesus will predict his death another 2 times in Luke's gospel before he reaches Jerusalem. AND YET, and yet, Jesus still resolves to go there and face his detractors.

So what does this tell us about the character of Jesus?

And just as importantly, what will this defining characteristic of Jesus that shapes his whole life and ministry set into motion? And how can this speak into our lives today?

When we look at Jesus Christ, what stands out front and centre is always His sheer COURAGE. His *resolute steadfast* courage. His unwavering determination to always do the right thing before God and live out this different Kingdom way. Even if it comes at a cost.

Here's yet another significant context to the back story.

Chapter 9:11 As the crowds learned about it and followed Jesus, he welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed healing.

In the face of fierce opposition, threat and challenge, not only does Jesus have the resolute courage to walk towards Jerusalem, but he also has the courage to keep on living out the Kingdom way of what it means to be truly human.

Jesus has the courage to go where the pain is and to heal those who need healing.

Jesus has the courage to challenge the life diminishing presence of the law and religious dogma, with the life-giving spirit of mercy and grace. It's why he heals on the Sabbath.

Jesus has the courage to speak truth to power.

Jesus has the courage to face what needs to be faced, and to do what needs to be done.

HOW DOES THIS SPEAK TO YOU AND I TODAY

None of us will face what Jesus faced, but all of us have faced, will face, circumstances of challenge. Situations where we feel criticised, undermined, maybe even threatened, and we may not want to go there. We may be tempted to compromise our faith and what we know in our hearts is the right thing to do. Do we have the courage to face what needs to be faced and to do what needs to be done? Even though we know at times, it could be costly. Today and this coming Easter week, will be a reminder to all of us, that when life gets costly, (as it inevitably will), we take our inspiration from Jesus.

And here's a big thought for us all to ponder about the transforming influence, of Jesus Christ.

We know that the Cross and Resurrection are a world changing moment for humanity.

We know that the saving redeeming power of the Cross has reverberated down the ages and transformed the life of billions of people.

We know that all these people have been inspired by this figure of Christ.

But I would ask, isn't all of this is founded on the courage of Jesus Christ do the right thing all the way to the Cross. And doesn't this reveal a fundamental truth of our faith and life. That courage begets courage, goodness begets goodness. Hope begets hope.

And all of this was brought home to me very powerfully by this film that Kim and I went to see at the Lido two weeks ago, called *Cabrini*. It's one of the most inspiring films I've ever seen.

It's the true story of Sister Frances Cabrini born in 1850 in a small village outside of Milan. Despite her constant frail health, she is determined to create an institute of Missionary sisters to bring hope to destitute orphaned children.

The story starts in New York in 1819 where a massive Italian immigrant population lives in in chaos and poverty. As Sister Cabrini puts it ... ***"rats live in better conditions than these orphaned Italian children."*** But, along with seven other courageous young women she has an unwavering resolute determination to build what she calls an **Empire of Hope**. To be the presence of Christ and to heal those who need healing.

Her story is one of constant opposition, criticism and even threats on her life. But when anyone (be it Bishops, Archbishops, and town authorities) give her plans a resounding 'no', she resolutely and with enormous courage sets her face towards Rome to personally visit the Pope ... and she tenaciously, fearlessly persuades him to give her a "yes". She never shirks speaking truth to power.

Against all the odds she builds this Empire of hope. Before she dies in 1917 (and in spite of her frail health), she makes 23 trans-Atlantic crossings, and establishes many schools, hospitals and orphanages.

In recognition of her kingdom endeavours she was canonized in 1946, and today the kingdom fruit of her work is in six continents and 15 countries throughout the world.

But all of this 'Empire of Hope' is built on this one defining Christ-like characteristic of courage. Resolute courage. Her unwavering steadfast determination to bring healing to those who need healing. To face what needs to be faced and to do what needs to be done,

And as we came away from the cinema, I was processing some profound thoughts.

Firstly, just how much this **one** life - of this **one** woman - had touched and transformed so many other lives... and the undeniable truth, that courage begets courage, goodness begets goodness and hope begets hope.

Secondly, this was a life inspired by her faith in Jesus Christ.

And in the deep way that God works, when Jesus courageously enters Jerusalem into all the dark forces that oppose and resist His different kingdom way, He sets into motion all the events that lead to the Cross and Resurrection ... and this unleashes a force of light and inspiration into the hearts and lives of humanity. And Sister Cabrini is just one of the countless millions who have been inspired to live this different kingdom way of what it means to be human.

Now I know that this is a remarkable and stand out example, but I firmly believe it can still translate into the reality of all our daily lives and the challenges we can all face.

As we have said on many occasions, we live in a time of immense challenges, and I think we can all underestimate the value of our courage.

So where in your life at this moment, do you recognise the need for courage in the face of resistance and adversity?

- Everyday brings a collision between different ways of what it means to be human.
- Every day can test and tempt us to lose sight of what it means to live out the Kingdom way.
- Forgiveness requires courage. Vulnerability requires courage. Living with Grace towards others requires courage. Speaking truth to power requires courage.
- To not let fear get a foothold in our hearts requires courage.

And sometimes, just finding the strength to face each new day requires immense courage.

I'll begin to conclude with a verse that's only found in Luke's version of the Palm Sunday events. And as soon as I read it, it jumped out to me and its why I went for Lukes's version today. Why did it jump out?

Because for me, this goes to the very heart of why our Christian faith can give all of us the encouragement to hold on to our courage in the face of adversity and challenge.

All 4 gospels have Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey but only Luke has Jesus saying this.

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

⁴⁰ "I tell you, "Jesus replied, "if they keep quiet, (if you silence them) **the stones will cry out.**"

Now don't you love it when Jesus gives enigmatic replies that no-one quite understands but we intuitively know is pointing us to a deep wisdom truth.

We see exactly the same wisdom in today's O/T reading from Habakkuk 2 ... "Woe to those who build their house by unjust gain, **the stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.**

What did Jesus mean by this.

All the scholars of course have different takes, but they all point us to the same deep wisdom. **God's truth will out. God's truth will always prevail.**

In other words, when anyone or anything, tries to silence God's Kingdom way of love, justice and peace: then in some sense, all the creative order will bear witness to God's truth and cry out to hold us accountable. God's truth will always prevail.

Isn't this the heartbeat for our Christian faith and the reason that you and I can have courage. Because ultimately, we believe that

The Way of the donkey will always prevail over the way of the warhorse.

The way of peace will always prevail over the way of fear, and coercive power.

The way of the servant heart will always prevail over the way of the self-serving heart.

Because courage begets courage, goodness begets goodness, and hope begets hope.

This, the Cornerstone of our Living Hope in Jesus Christ?