

Sermon for 9th April - Palm Sunday - 8am service - Matt 21:1-11, 19- end and Psalm 118:1-2,19-end

We are all familiar with today's reading from Matthew's gospel. Palm Sunday comes every year and so every year we read of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey; being acclaimed by the crowds, having his path covered in coats and being fanned by multitudes of branches from the trees. It is a glorious picture and must have been really exciting at the time, even if in hindsight, we now see this episode as the beginning of the end for Jesus.

It is a great and glorious narrative which gives us a picture of Jesus kingship and rule beginning, but also a story which sends a shiver down the spine as we look with the knowledge of Good Friday on how the story unfolds, and the fickleness of the crowd.

However, I want to draw our attention briefly to the point of the story - the interpretation of the careful choreography that Jesus orchestrated beforehand. The key verse is verse 10 - "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' "

This question of who Jesus is is the whole point. The response of the crowd in verse 11 is that he is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth. And this is absolutely true in as far as it goes. But it is like saying that Winston Churchill was a young army officer in the Boer War, or like saying Spider-Man was a young reporter with the Daily Planet. Neither description really encapsulates the significance of the character despite both statements being true.

The crowd clearly know who Jesus is on one level. But not every prophet from a minor backwater is welcomed into Jerusalem like Jesus was. Even the crowd instinctively knew there was something different about Jesus, even if they couldn't articulate it. They'd had to fall back on what they knew - Psalms and Jewish statements about their promised Messiah. These phrases learned as children had given them the words they needed to express the wonder they felt at Jesus and their best guess at who he really was. But when asked about it, they really didn't know much more.

Thus the whole story becomes a bit of a riddle - who is this Jesus character who supernaturally arranges his transport? Who is this Jesus who rides in on a donkey to fulfil prophecies from long ago about Israel's King? Who is this Jesus who the crowd openly acknowledge as a prophet but their actions and celebrations proclaim him much more than that?

The answer to the riddle is played out across all the gospels, but particularly over the Easter week as this man who is a prophet, does a kingly thing but in a supernatural way, and then is celebrated as Messiah, the one come to save Israel, then cleans a temple out, falls into dispute with authorities, gets betrayed by his friends and then tortured and killed. Who is this Jesus?

And then let's not forget, who is this Jesus who rises to life on the third day, Easter morning?

So, for this week, Easter week, I'm setting homework! As you live through the Easter story again, beginning at Palm Sunday today with the crowd's question, Who is Jesus? As you go through this week, try to work out the answer. Who is Jesus for you? What does all this mean for you? Why does it matter who he is? And finally, what do I need to do about it? I'm not going to give answers today. I'm happy to discuss in person, but I really want everyone, from whatever service, and those outside the church to grapple with this question this week, Who is Jesus? The answer to that question is why the gospels were written and it's why we are Christians.

Have a great week of contemplation! Let me pray for you now as you seek to find or re-find the answer:

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would give us Godly insight and faithful hearts that we may seek and find who Jesus is. Amen.