

Morningside

09-04-2017

Matthew 21: 1-11

Palm Sunday

*Ride on, ride on, the time is right: the roadside crowds scream with delight;
Evil and angel voices rhyme: this is the man and this the time.*

Cometh the hour, cometh the man

28th May, 1940 is the most famous example. The War Cabinet, a national coalition, was meeting, chaired by Churchill, who had been Prime Minister for eighteen days. The issue before them was clear. Should they cut a deal with Hitler? Two of the seven present supported the proposal; Churchill was vehemently against. Had the vote been only among his own party Churchill would have lost, the navy would have been handed over, and a Nazi puppet government installed in London. But in the Coalition Cabinet Winston Churchill won the vote by a squeak: they would fight on the beaches, they would never surrender. And you could hear every fly on every wall in that Cabinet Office whispering *This is the man and this the time*.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They cheer wildly. There is a sense of enormous excitement, a sense that something really big is happening. No-one is quite sure what is happening, but you can hear them shout *This is the man and this the time*. But some of them remember Jesus himself saying "The Son of Man must suffer many thingsand be killed"; and they are not shouting so loud, but they too are thinking *This is the man and this the time*. And Jesus himself? What is he saying?

For the religious leaders this is the man. The man they had been waiting for about to be given up into their hands. He had been trouble from the start. All the things he said about riff-raff getting into heaven before decent people. All the things he did: breaking the sabbath to heal a man, claiming to have the divine power to forgive sins – there were even rumours about the dead being raised to life. And the people he mixed with: he never cared whether they were respectable or not, he never cared whether they kept

the Temple rules or not. Most of all it was his attitude to religion which infuriated them. They heard that he used to say “You have heard the old tradition of our faith, but I tell you...” Who did he think he was with “I tell you” Putting himself above Moses and the prophets, was he? Even talking about the Temple being destroyed and raising up a new temple. The man is a menace. He has to go. We’re waiting for him. Oh yes. This is the man.

For the disciples this is the man. He has been the man all along. Some of them right back to that first day at the seaside when he spoke about catching fish and catching people. For all of them he was the man when they listened to him and he spoke like no-one they had ever heard. He spoke about God and God’s special care for children and the poor and women and all the others who never had belonged. And when he laid his hands on a poor blind man and made him see – oh yes, He was their man. Sometimes he was a puzzle: his stories didn’t always seem to make sense. Sometimes he could be very stern. But for the disciples there was something inexpressibly wonderful, something incomparably lovable, something that made you a better person than you ever thought possible. And on this day it was wonderful for them to see how the crowds welcomed him. That day the whole people saw what the disciples had seen all along.

For the Bible writers this is the man. That is why they wrote the New Testament. We read this morning St Matthew’s version of the story. He fills it with theological clues, clues to his conviction that this Jesus is the promised one of God, the Messiah. He writes that they cut down branches from trees and waved them in the air – just as the crowds had done decades before when their conquering king Judas Maccabaeus rode into town. He writes that they quoted the pilgrim psalm 118 – *Blessed in the name of the Lord is the one who comes*. He writes that they shouted Hosanna – the old cry of the people to their saviour and king – the old cry for deliverance. For Matthew there is no doubt that Jesus is the man. So he quotes the old prophet Zechariah *Behold your king comes to you, riding on a donkey*.

For the Bible writers, for the disciples, for the crowd, and for the High Priests and Pharisees, there is no doubt on Palm Sunday that this is the man.

Equally there is no doubt that this is the time. Jesus could hardly have chosen a more dramatic time. It was Passover time, so religious fervour was at its height. Moreover, the city was packed. The Roman historian Tacitus estimated the population of Jerusalem at the time to be over half a million, the same size as Edinburgh. But for Passover week another two and a half million people crowded into the city. The city was surging with people, keyed up with religious expectations. This is the time.

This is the time for the High Priests and the Pharisees. Their power was at its peak during the great religious festival. Dirty work could be done quite easily with so much going on. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had been making mistakes and there was a sense that he was vulnerable and could be manipulated. They were taking soundings and they had picked out Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, as a likely traitor. For the leaders of religion this was exactly the right time.

This is the time also for the disciples. They had been asking him for ever when the great day would come? They had been patient. They had been confused. And they had been restless as the waiting went on. They had given up so much for him and they had followed him when it was wonderful and they had followed him when it was very difficult. He had promised that the kingdom of God was coming. Now – the excitement of Jerusalem – the cheering of the crowds. Now, surely, the waiting was over. This is the time.

This is most certainly the time for the Bible writers. St Matthew begins his account of the work of Jesus with that titanic struggle in the wilderness between Jesus and the Tempter: a struggle in which Jesus destiny is hammered out as the one who will trust God whatever the consequences. Matthew has emphasised over and over again in his gospel that Jesus will only meet his destiny when he suffers, dies and is buried; and it is that that he is facing when he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

On Palm Sunday Destiny's Child rides into Jerusalem as the Lamb of God
Ride on, ride on, the time is right: the roadside crowds scream with delight;

Evil and angel voices rhyme: this is the man and this the time.

We are going to finish this sermon with a prayer. It is a prayer which suggests that the Palm Sunday story is not just a moment of past history – of interest to religious leaders and disciples and Bible writers; but that it might be a turning point moment still, for us. It is an old prayer for Palm Sunday which asks Jesus who once entered the rebellious city of Jerusalem to enter our hearts.

As we pray for the one who entered Jerusalem to enter our hearts there might be one here ready to follow him not only with words but with deeds and life. There might be several here whose need is for a glimmer of light where everything around you seems dark. There might be many here who have to live with an ache in the heart, or a heavy weight of guilt, or a crippling fear that will not go away. And probably every one of us here is ready to walk in newness of life. So do not let the moment go by: as we all pray this prayer, pray it in your own heart.

Lord Jesus Christ, on the first Palm Sunday you entered the rebellious city where you were to die. Enter our hearts, we pray, and subdue them to yourself. And as your disciples blessed your coming and spread garments and branches in your way, make us ready to lay at your feet all that we have and are, that we too may bless your coming in the name of the Lord.

Amen.